

Media Briefing: Nathan Tinkler and the Leard Forest Coal Complex

1. **Farmers and environmentalists are joining together** to protect the Leard State Forest and surrounding rich farmland in the Maules Ck area east of Narrabri.
2. Three proposed or expanded mines will result in a mega mine-complex with **billionaire Nathan Tinkler** as one of the major beneficiaries of the **destruction of this public forest**.
3. Extensive **National Party links** raise questions about the ability of both the NSW Government and the Planning Assessment Commission to make **unbiased decisions** on the mine proposals.

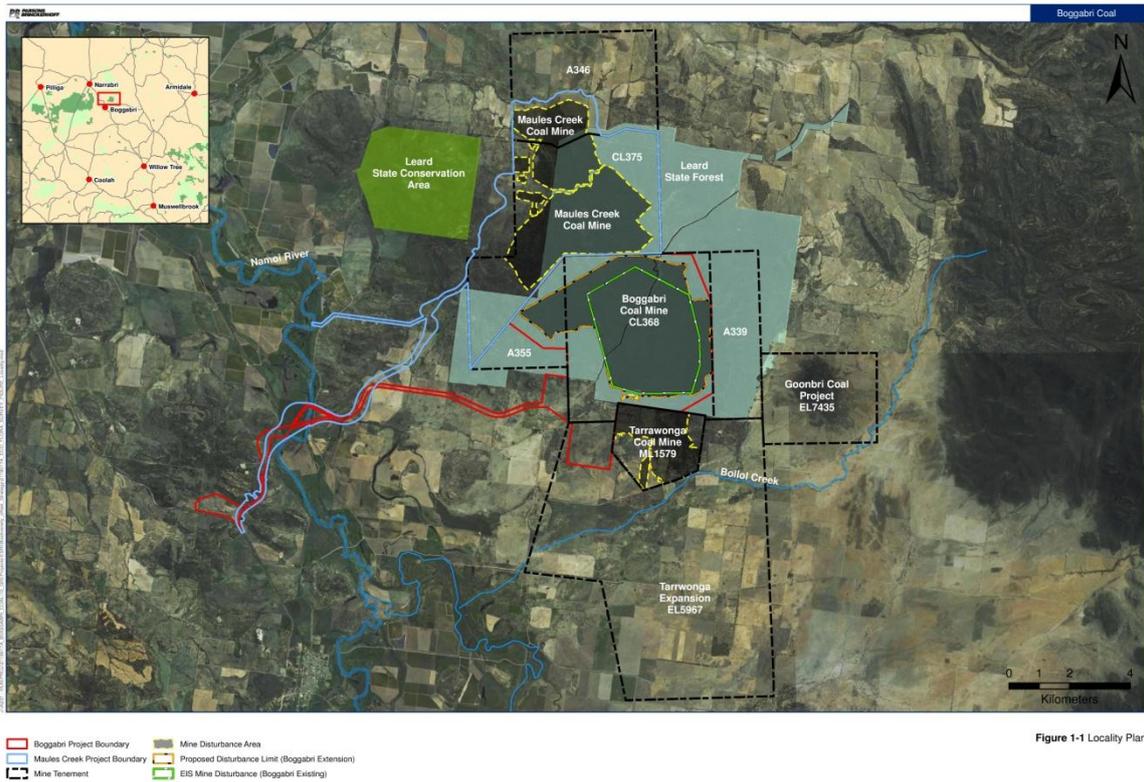


Figure 1: The two existing mines - Leard State Forest and adjoining farmland is now threatened by a fivefold expansion

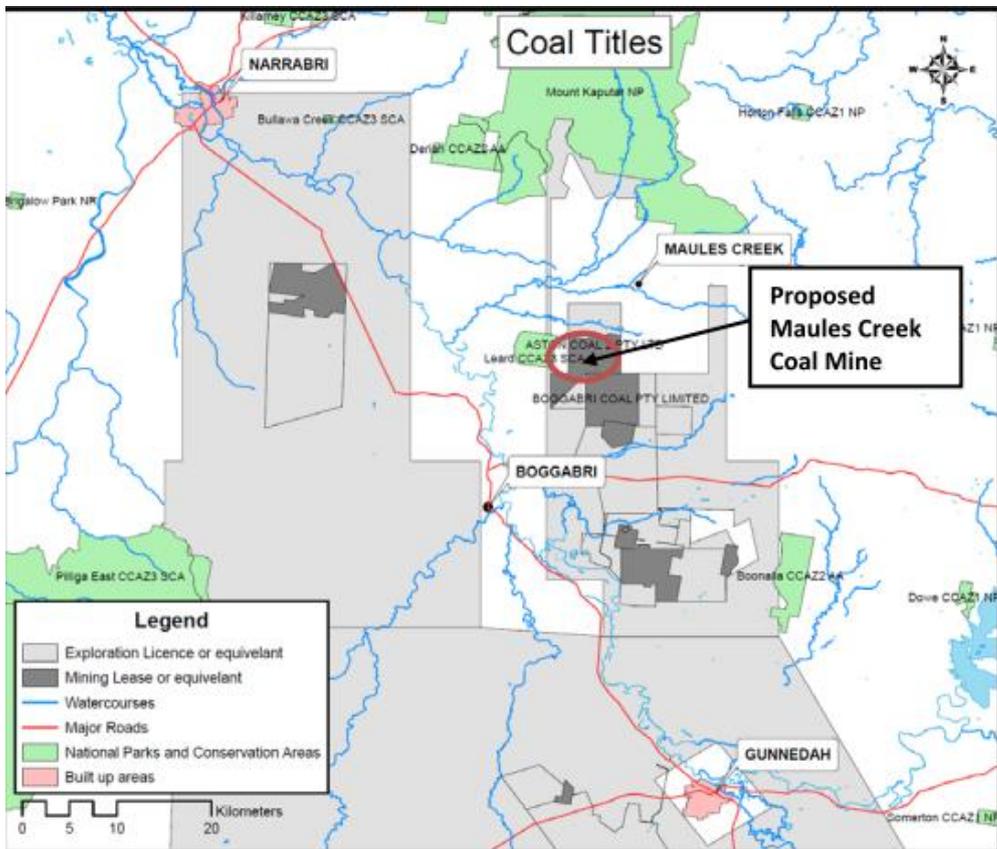
The Threat

- There are three open-cut coal mine developments and expansions currently planned for Leard State Forest and adjoining farmland.
- The developments include:
 1. The Maules Ck Coal Mine, owned by the Whitehaven/Aston Resources merger, which has a current proposal for a 2,000ha greenfield open-cut coal mine.
 2. The Boggabri Coal Mine, owned by Idemitsu, which has an operating mine of approx 400ha and wants to expand fourfold for a total area of 1,800ha open-cut coal.
 3. The Tarrawonga Coal Mine, a joint venture between Idemitsu/Whitehaven, which has a current open-cut coal mine and wants to expand to cover a further 517 hectares.
- These new mines and expansions will increase coal production fivefold to 23 million tonnes per annum.
- This is just the tip of the iceberg for the Narrabri area - there are coal exploration leases all the way from Narrabri to Gunnedah and the full cumulative impacts of future mining are still unquantified.

Map 1: The proposed Leard Forest Mega Mine-Complex



Map 2: Coal exploration titles extend almost all the way from Narrabri to Gunnedah (PAC Report).



Social Impacts and History

"After you cross the Harparary Bridge, take the Maules Creek road and head for 'the hills'. Maules Creek is situated at the foothills of the Mt Kaputar National Park and is truly amazing countryside. The rugged and enchanting landscape hides a deep rich black soil, perfectly suited to farming. As a result the region harbours some of the country's leading cattle studs. Water flows from the mountains, trickling through Melaleuca lined creeks to arrive as clear as crystal. Many beautiful locations along the river provide captivating hideaways to have a picnic or just enjoy the presence of nature. The size and grandeur of the Nandewar Ranges viewed from the Maules Creek area is truly spectacular".¹

- Maules Ck is a beautiful rural area nestled in the shadow of Mt Kaputar, a place where farming and conservation has reached a kind of equilibrium.
- The Laird family have been farming in the Maules Ck area, just north of the Leard State forest, for six generations².
- The State Forest was named after their forebear, William Laird, who ran a small sawmill in the area.
- Wilma and Bruce Laird and three of their five sons still run farms in the Maules Ck area.
- Phil Laird is the president of the Maules Ck Community Council which was created to represent the community in challenging the mines.
- Maules Ck will be changed forever from a small thriving farming community into a massive industrial zone. The community is suffering severe decline as miners buy up properties and the future is one of dangerous coal dust, noise and traffic.

Figures 2 & 3: Farmland at Maules Ck; local community at a picnic protest with 'Community Not Coal' signs; stitching by local CWA members.



¹ http://www.visitnarrabri.com.au/index.cfm?page_id=1008&page_name=Maules%20Creek

² <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/farmers-fight-with-mines-for-land-20120504-1y44z.html>

Biodiversity Value and Environmental Impacts

- The Leard Forest is an 8000 Ha biodiversity hotspot recently identified as a Tier 1 Biodiversity Area by the NSW Government in the draft New England-North West Strategic Regional Land Use Plan (SRLUP).
- The SRLUP states that Tier 1 areas 'cannot sustain any further loss' and are 'critical to biodiversity persistence' but then does nothing to protect such areas from mining.
- Leard State Forest is the largest remnant left on the heavily cleared Liverpool Plains and provides habitat for up to 34 threatened species including the Koala.
- Over half of the entire State Forest and close to 5,000ha in total, will be cleared by the three mines.
- Leard State Forest contains over 1,500 hectares of Box Gum Woodland listed as a critically endangered ecological community by the EPBC Act, with 1,100 hectares earmarked for clearing.
- It is undoubtedly one of the largest and most intact stands of Box-Gum left in Australia, with over 100 hollows per hectare.
- Adjoining farmers are not allowed to clear Box-Gum woodland of this quality under the Native Vegetation Act 2003 but miners are exempt.
- Purchase of farmland with small, disturbed patches of remnant vegetation is being used to offset the impacts to the Leard Forest, but they do not match it on size, configuration or vegetation condition.
- Cumulative greenhouse gas emissions from the coal produced will be greater than the total greenhouse emissions from countries such as New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden and Hungary and 167 other countries.

Leard State Forest: The Largest Remnant Left on the Liverpool Plains



 Liverpool Plains IBRA Subregion  20 0 20 Kilometers

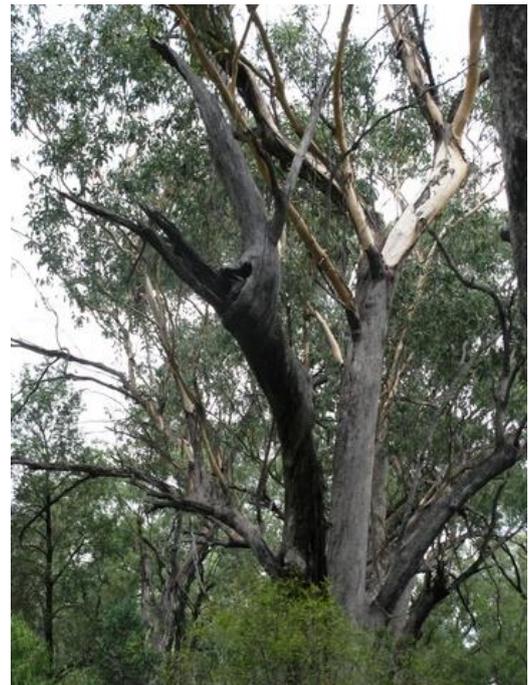


Google Earth close-up of Boggabri mine, April 2012



Google Earth Wide View of Leard SF, April 2012

Figures 4 & 5: Clearing of endangered Box-Gum woodland at Boggabri Coal Mine, June 2011; Box Gum in Leard State Forest.



Health Impacts

- The proposed mine complex will convert the forest into a dust bowl - producing an estimated 18,000t of dust per annum that will land on farms in the Maules Ck area, with serious health risks.
- The southerly prevailing winds, inversion layers (that are present 41% of the time generally and 69% over winter) and the “catchers mitt” topography provided by the Nandewar Range to the north means that the air quality impacts will be concentrated over the district of Maules Creek.
- The air quality modelling by the mines in their environmental assessments virtually ignored the topography and substantially under-estimated the dust impacts.
- Analysis by Maules Ck Community Council suggests that the zone of affectation from the dust will in fact be 67,000ha which is many times greater than that estimated by the mining companies.

Figures 6, 7 & 8: Major land-use change, industrialisation and dust impacts



Political Context

- There are strong National Party connections with the Maules Ck Mine in particular.
- Nathan Tinkler founded Aston Resources in 2008 (which was publicly listed in mid 2010) and was appointed board chairman in November last year as well as being a substantial shareholder.
- Aston Resources recently merged with Whitehaven Coal. Nathan Tinkler now has a 20% stake in the \$5.1 billion merger.
- Nathan Tinkler has made donations to the National Party at state and federal levels that were not declared to the Planning Department when the development application for the Aston Resources Maules Ck Project was submitted³. The matter is subject to investigation by NSW Planning.
- Mark Vaile, former Deputy Prime Minister and former leader of the National Party of Australia, has been the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of Aston Resources and is now the Chairman of the merger⁴.
- Liam Bathgate is a director of a lobbyist firm (Australian Public Affairs) which has been employed by Aston Resources on the Maules Ck Project⁵. Bathgate is a former chief of staff to Barry O'Farrell (whilst in opposition) and an ex-general secretary of the NSW National Party.
- The Planning Lobbyist Register shows he has contacted the Planning Department a number of times in relation to the Maules Ck Coal Project⁶.

Economics

- Large mining camps are planned for Narrabri and Boggabri for drive in/drive out and fly in/fly out workers to service the mines.
- The economic modelling conducted by the proponents ignored the external costs of greenhouse gases and ignored the costs associated with crowding out of the non-mining economy.
- The Maules Ck Coal project has effectively over-estimated economic benefits by \$3billion because it erroneously included profits to overseas shareholders in the benefits to Australia. The Boggabri Coal Project ignored the fact that most benefits would accrue to overseas shareholders.
- Underground mining, which could produce economic outcomes without major health and environmental impacts associated with open-cut mining, has been ruled out because it is not sufficiently 'profitable'.
- Boggabri Coal is 100% foreign owned and, although unquantified, a very substantial proportion of the Whitehaven/Aston Resources merger is also comprised of foreign interests.

Figures 9 & 10: Before and after mining at Leard State Forest



³ <http://www.theherald.com.au/news/local/news/politics/tinkler-faces-questions-over-donations-to-nationals/2423294.aspx>

⁴ http://www.whitehaven.net.au/about_us/board_of_directors.cfm

⁵ http://www.apa.net.au/staff_profiles_onecolumn.html

⁶ <http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/?tabid=508>

Approvals Process

- A merits review has been conducted by the Planning Assessment Commission (PAC) of the Boggabri and Maules Ck proposals and approval recommended for both, thus removing third party legal rights.
- Community groups believe that the Terms of Reference of the PAC have not been met and that cumulative impacts in relation to air quality and biodiversity have not been properly assessed.
- The NSW Government now intends to constitute a second PAC to make a final decision.
- The Federal Government has called in the Maules Ck and Tarrawonga mines, but only partially called in the Boggabri Coal Mine. This means mining of 500ha of the nationally endangered Box-Gum woodland and of Koala habitat will not require Federal approval.
- The mines have been pushed through the NSW development assessment process despite the fact neither the Namoi Water Study, the cumulative risk assessment of mining in the Namoi Catchment nor the Strategic Land Use Planning process have been completed yet.
- The mines have not yet been referred to the new Federal Independent Expert Scientific Committee, despite the fact they are likely to have a significant impact on water resources via:
 1. Biodiversity impacts on a unique suite of aquatic invertebrates which live in the Maules Ck alluviums, known as stygofauna, that are sensitive to changes in water depth and chemistry.
 2. The proposed diversion of 3km of Goonbri Creek, a system in high ecological condition, by the Tarrawonga Coal Mine.
 3. Massive changes to drainage due to changed landforms and proposals for very deep final voids.
- There have been a number of environmental incidents with the existing mines after large rainfall events this year, raising concerns if the proposed expansions go ahead.
 1. The Boggabri Coal Mine obtained approval to discharge 700 million litres of water that had accumulated in its pit into a tributary of the Namoi River.
 2. Two penalty infringement notices were issued to the Tarrawonga coal mine for an incident in January 2012 when a surface diversion bank failed and water entered Goonbri Creek.

Neither the Maules Ck Community nor the broader north-west region supports open-cut coal mining at Leard State Forest. Decisions on the mines are imminent. The ability of the NSW Government to make an objective decision is questionable. The Leard State Forest mega mine-complex should be rejected.

Figure 11. Protest against clearing of endangered ecosystems at Boggabri Coal Mine, April 2012.



For Information or Comment:

Phil Laird, Maules Creek Community Council - 0428 712622

Carmel Flint, Northern Inland Council for the Environment - 0400 521474

Drew Hutton, President, Lock The Gate Alliance - 0428 487110

Websites

<http://www.maulescreek.org/>

<http://www.facebook.com/maulescreek>

<http://www.kateausburn.com/2012/04/10/leard-state-forest-next-frontier-of-the-coal-industry/>

<http://www.npansw.org.au/index.php/campaigns-parentmenu-434/npa-west-parentmenu-461/coal-mining.html>

Detailed submissions by the Maules Ck Community Council to the Department of Planning can be found at:

Boggabri Coal

<https://majorprojects.affinitylive.com/public/e179a747b047a98a6eb688d7faefcf0b/Boggabri%20Coal%20Project%20Application%20-%20MCCC%20Submission%20-%20AA%20Full%20Submission.pdf>

Maules Creek Coal

<https://majorprojects.affinitylive.com/public/feb5443b755a0eb6abb0e7825a85685c/Special%20Interest%20Group%20Maules%20Creek%20Community%20Council%20Part%201.pdf>

Tarrawonga

<https://majorprojects.affinitylive.com/public/c4ab49a46aa4b7f1fbdec73b2babf876/MCCC%20Submission%20Tarrawonga%20Project%20Application-1.pdf>