From:
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Subject: [CoalCommunities] Hunter Coal on 4 Corners this Monday
Date: Friday, 9 April 2010 2:59:07 PM
Attachments:

One to watch

A Dirty Business

Reporter: Andrew Fowler

Broadcast: 12/04/2010

Australia might be riding on the coal miner's back but it seems many Australians are paying a terrible price for the mineral export boom. Reporter Andrew Fowler goes to the Hunter Valley in New South Wales to document a community in crisis.

Colin is a truck driver. He lives and works in the upper Hunter Valley surrounded by open cut coal mines. Ten months ago he was driving his ten tonne truck down a local road when he was overwhelmed by a cloud of dust and gas, he says came from a nearby mine. The fumes instantly gave him a headache and very nearly made him lose consciousness. Fortunately he managed to maintain control of his vehicle.

Afterwards he phoned the mine involved and the company apologised. He then phoned the State's Department of Environment to make a complaint. What no-one told him was that he had most likely been hit by a cloud containing nitrous oxide gas that could seriously injure his health.

Two weeks later he received an "off the record" call from a senior official inside the Department of Environment warning him he needed to get a health check.

"They wanted an off record ... to say to get my health checked over, after going through this yellow cloud cause the effects could have been quite serious.

Q. So clearly somebody in the Environment Department thought there was a serious danger that you'd been placed in and yet they weren't prepared to tell you that on the record publicly.

No, definitely not. It was definitely a keep this quiet sort of call. "

Colin isn't alone in his concerns about the impact of mining on health and he isn't alone in asking if the State Government is doing all it can to protect people's health. The Upper Hunter Valley has three coal fired power stations. The Upper Valley now has 14 massive open cut coal mines, producing 99 million tonnes of coal a year and there are more new mines on the way. The result is a massive increase in the amount of coal mine dust and power station pollutants in the air. Are the levels dangerous? It seems the State Government, that's approved the mines and takes significant royalties from them, doesn't want to find out.

What the residents do know is that many children in the region are getting sick. Asthma is rife, many have developed persistent coughs and others are experiencing recurring skin disorders.

Residents in the Valley have asked the Health Department to run tests on the health of the region's children. Instead they've been ignored. Again the question is why? For now at least local residents believe there is only one plausible answer.

"Royalties and earnings from power stations and from coal transport, that's the only possible reason that we can come up with.

Q. And so are you really saying then that the Government's putting the royalties it gets from power stations and coal mining ahead of the health concerns of the people of the Upper Hunter?

A. Well, I can't be quite as dogmatic about that but I mean we can't see any other reasons why."

Faced with a State Government that refuses to fund an independent study looking at the impact of coal mining and power station emissions on health, one local GP has decided he will do the work the Government won't fund. He's paying for the work himself. Nearly nine hundred school students are already part of his study. His reasons for doing it are simple:

"I think it's like with a general practice in the community. Here I'm more thinking about prevention because nowadays we just concentrate on treating disease but we're not really treating the cause of the problem, if we try to prevent the disease happening in the first place, it is money well spent."

In a situation like this local residents have every reason to feel abandoned. They ask, are there more serious health problems arising in the Valley? Many residents have already taken the decision to leave - some for their own health, some for the health of their children.**"A Dirty Business" goes to air on Monday 12th April at 8.30pm on ABC 1. It is repeated on Tuesday 13th April at 11.35 pm. Also on iView.**

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"Never explain what you are doing. This wastes a good deal of time and rarely gets through. Show them through your action, if they don't understand it, fuck 'em, maybe you'll hook them with the next action."
-- Abbie Hoffman, Revolution for the Hell of It, 1968