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Voters' backlash looms against coal mine



"Substantive and compelling evidence" ... Alan Hayes, co-ordinator for the residents' action group, Australian Coal Alliance, at the Mardi pump pool on the Wyong River.

Photo: *Kate Geraghty*

Wendy Frew Environment Reporter
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A PROPOSAL for a large underground mine in the picturesque Dooralong and Yarramalong valleys on the Central Coast is set to turn into a major political battle ahead of the state election because of fears the mine could threaten local rivers and aquifers.

Residents upset about the mine, proposed for a site about five kilometres west of The Entrance, have launched a campaign encouraging people to vote for Coalition candidates after the Opposition Leader, Peter Debnam, promised to block the Wallarah 2 coal project.

"We do have substantive and compelling evidence that the mine will impact on the integrity of the water catchment," said Alan Hayes, the campaign co-ordinator for the residents' action group, Australian Coal Alliance. "Throughout Australia, longwall coal mining has had a destructive impact on water systems."

Dam levels are down to about 13.9 per cent on the Central Coast and local councils are considering drastic measures such as installing temporary desalination plants on beaches.

Mr Hayes said the proposed site of the mine was one of the two largest sources of water for the Central Coast, accounting for about 50 per cent of the catchment. "To interfere with that is ludicrous," he said.

He was also worried the underground mine proposed by Kores Australia, which is owned by the South Korean Government, could lead to major land subsidence. "We are encouraging

people to vote for Coalition candidates," he said. "We are making it very, very political because we have a window of opportunity coming up to the election and governments get very worried around that time."

The State Government has made no commitment either way on whether the mine will be approved. A spokeswoman for the Planning Minister, Frank Sartor, said a development application had not yet been lodged by the company. However, she said water security for the Central Coast would be taken into account and there would be a "thorough and lengthy investigation" of all issues associated with the mine.

The Coalition would not allow coal mining in the valleys to threaten the water catchment, a spokesman for Mr Debnam said.

"It makes this proposal pretty unlikely," he said, adding the Coalition had already distributed several thousand leaflets in the area stating its position.

A spokesman for Kores Australia, Peter Smith, said the company had promised residents the mine would not damage the local water catchment. "It is early days. People want all of the answers now, but we are progressing in a thorough, scientific way on a technically sound basis," Mr Smith said. "We are fully aware of the community's concerns about water."

He said mining would only take place beneath 6 per cent of the water catchment area, would be well clear of any water storage facilities, and was not expected to damage nearby rivers or aquifers.

He said it was not fair to compare the planned mine with underground mines near the Cataract River, south of Sydney, that had cracked river beds.

"The geology is very different; there is no rock underneath these valleys, so there are different geological stresses," Mr Smith said.

If approved, the mine would not start operating until 2010, but could have a lifespan of 40 years.

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