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Don't mention the other mines: Cumulative impacts, public participation and Queensland's Galilee Basin

Introduction

On 18 September 2008, GVK Hancock Pty Ltd announced their intention to complete an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for their proposed coal mine, Alpha Coal Project, in Queensland's Galilee Basin. Over the following four years, several mining companies initiated an EIA process for another five mines in the Galilee Basin and so began an intense period of exploration and assessment to create a new coal mining region on a scale not seen before in Australia. The Galilee Basin is a 247,000 square kilometre area located in Queensland's central west (Figure 1.2) with extensive thermal coal deposits estimated to contain 27,750 million tonnes of coal (ABC News, 2015). At the centre of the Galilee Basin is the town of Alpha, population 329 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Alpha and surrounding communities expect to experience significant, direct and cumulative social, environmental and economic impacts of the proposed mines. Specifically, community members are concerned about: increased demand on their already limited health and education services; decreased quality and quantity of local water supplies; and changes to the community's remote rural identity.

How mining companies address cumulative impacts has been the subject of several Queensland-based studies (Franks, Brereton, & Moran, 2010; Ivanova, Rolfe, Lockie, & Timmer, 2007; Lockie, Franettovich, Sharma, & Rolfe, 2008; Rolfe, Miles, Lockie, & Ivanova, 2007). Cumulative impacts are defined as "one or more activities having successive, incremental and combined impacts on society, the economy and the environment" (Bond, Everingham, & Franks, 2013: 3). Historically, the cumulative impacts of multiple projects in a region have placed increasing pressure on the resources of local communities (Franks, Brereton, & Moran, 2009). For the proposed Galilee Basin coal mines, the inclusion of cumulative impacts in the EIA process was guided by the Terms of Reference (TOR). The

TOR stipulated how mining companies should approach cumulative impacts in their Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). In addition to a dedicated cumulative impacts section in each TOR, reference is made to the importance of addressing cumulative impacts in a number of other sections throughout the TOR.

Each TOR described what is required regarding cumulative impacts but a difference in wording allowed for wide variation in how and how much cumulative impact information was presented. How cumulative impacts were addressed was also influenced by the order in which a mine began its EIS process compared with other mines within the region. How order affects cumulative impacts is addressed in more detail later in this paper. Cumulative impacts were addressed in the EIS, however, cumulative impact information was difficult to navigate for reasons relating to the length and complexity of the EIS and the resources available to stakeholders to review it. Information on cumulative impacts was also spread through the EIS under different chapters pertaining to social, economic and environmental issues.

Methodology

The research employed case study research methodology for four selected mines within the Galilee Basin, as follows:

- Alpha Coal Project, owned by GVK Hancock
- China First Coal Project, owned by Waratah Coal
- Kevin's Corner Mine, owned by GVK Hancock
- South Galilee Coal Project, owned by AMCI Group

In addition to document analysis, 25 semi-structured interviews were also conducted. Interviewees were divided into eight categories: academic, agricultural body, consultant, landholder, legal, local government, NGOs, and state government. Interviewees were given an anonymous number and this number is used to attribute quotes throughout the paper. The document analysis examined relevant sections of the Terms of Reference, Environmental Impact Statement and Supplementary Environmental Impact Statements submitted by each mining company.

Findings

The desire of stakeholders to understand cumulative impacts was a recurring theme during interviews and the document analysis. The content of submissions received during the review and comment period for the Alpha Coal Project (the first mine to initiate the EIA process) revealed that citizens were concerned that cumulative impacts across the region were not addressed in sufficient detail from the development of the first mine. One submission called for a regional cumulative impact report prior to the approval of any mines. “It is deeply problematic that the various projects planned in the Galilee Basin are being considered on a one-by-one basis, rather than beginning with a comprehensive regional assessment of what might be appropriate development in the region” (Citizen submission on the EIS. Hancock Prospecting Pty Ltd, 2011: 7).

The first mine to release their EIS has an advantage in that the limited availability of information on the potential impact of other proposed mines means that their capacity to address cumulative impacts is restricted. For example, in regard to addressing social impacts, GVK Hancock, owners of Alpha and the first to release its EIS, had an advantage in being the first-mover within the region. There was little GVK Hancock could do regarding cumulative impacts without an EIS for the other mines or any certainty that the other mines would go ahead and knowledge of what was proposed for them. Therefore, according to an interviewee (23), GVK Hancock viewed its cumulative impact information on social issues as a baseline which could be added to by the other mines. Another interviewee observed that it is very difficult to apply retrospective environmental conditions to a mine after it has been approved because of new cumulative impacts when another mine starts production, and it’s difficult to apply stricter environmental conditions on subsequent mines (22). However, this approach did little to appease stakeholders who were aware of other proposed projects and therefore saw little reason for failing to supply them with more complete cumulative impacts information.

Despite the TOR requiring cumulative impact information to be included in the EIS, these are often not completed to the satisfaction of citizens. One interviewee expressed clear frustration at this situation. “It’s written into the legislation that it has to happen, it’s a part of the requirement and it doesn’t and there is a clear problem there” (20). One reason for this dissatisfaction is reluctance on behalf of mining companies to address cumulative impacts in

the face of uncertainty over whether their own or other projects will go ahead and unnecessarily sharing commercially sensitive information. Reluctance to share information in the face of uncertainty, particularly from first-movers, inhibits the collaboration that underpins effective understanding and management of cumulative impacts (Porter, Franks, & Everingham, 2013). Similarly, according to an interviewee from the government sector, governments are reluctant to invest in expensive and time consuming regional cumulative impact assessment unless they are certain the proposed projects will go ahead (24). Therefore, uncertainty precludes mining companies and governments from investing fully in cumulative impact studies that would provide comprehensive information to facilitate informed decision-making, especially for the EIS for companies that commence the process earlier than others.

The downside of waiting for certainty that a project will go ahead before investing in a regional cumulative impact study is the time delay for that cumulative information to become available. “We don’t have the mechanisms in government to ramp up that quickly to deal with it. Like we have just, the Commonwealth have just finished a bioregional assessment of the Galilee. That has taken four years. But that’s the sort of timeframes” (21). Ideally, the cumulative information should be available during public participation or the development of an EIS, however, this is often not the case. “That community, they asked for this upfront and sensibly it should be upfront, the regional work, before the coordinator-general makes a decision about a second big coal mine” (24). Unfortunately for citizens, due to uncertainty and expense, there was a lack of cooperation between governments and mining companies, which precluded the development of comprehensive cumulative impact studies.

However, the sharing of information between competitors for a high value resource is not always welcomed or adhered to by mining companies. Commercial confidentiality was a significant barrier to addressing cumulative impacts. Commercial-in-confidence is significant given that the Galilee Basin, as a new mining region, may offer significant first-mover advantages over infrastructure and coal contracts. As one interviewee described, while some companies were open to cooperating, others were not and in the Australian context, there was no real incentive for them to do so (21). In addition to uncertainty, expense and timing, the competitive nature of opening up a new mining region further constrained the comprehensiveness of regional cumulative impact studies and hence the ability of the public to contribute to informed/ competent decisions.

Stakeholders indicated that a coordinated approach to generating information on cumulative impacts for community and landholders is appropriate. However, other stakeholders suspected that it was not in the best interests of mining companies, or even governments, to share cumulative impact information. Two interviewees observed that public knowledge of the full cumulative impacts of a new mining region may not be desirable for either mining companies or the Queensland and Australian Governments (13, 20). Mining is largely palatable to Queenslanders because of the contribution it makes to employment and government revenue through royalties and taxes (Moffat, Zhang, & Boughen, 2014). An economic development approach to mining has long dominated the EIA process in developed countries (Brueckner, Durey, Pforr, & Mayes, 2014; Devlin & Yap, 2008). The interviewees above imply that, given the (official) enthusiasm for mining development in Queensland, having the full picture of environmental and social impacts could diminish the value placed on, and the social acceptance of, the industry. Reduced acceptance of mining would in turn threaten the economic contribution that such projects would make to the State and to company shareholders.

Conclusion

Despite a desire for improved information on cumulative impacts, it remains a difficult issue to manage in a mining region. The TOR was perceived by some as the crucial tool in enforcing information sharing to manage cumulative impacts (24). Enforcing cooperation and information sharing through the TOR could bring information relating to cumulative impacts to light earlier in the development of a new region rather than as each EIS is completed and assessed. Earlier information on cumulative impacts would allow citizens to engage more effectively with the EIA process, particularly during key stages such as the EIS review and comment period when citizens have a limited time to make a submission and influence the outcome. Resolving these issues around participants' dissatisfaction with the way the current EIA process addresses cumulative impacts would improve both stakeholder experience of public participation and stakeholder understanding of potential impacts.

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