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Member for Blue Mountains



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New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

Status of the Blue Mountains Region Environment

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This evening I update the Parliament on the status of our pristine natural environment in the Blue Mountains and the Greater Blue Mountains region, including the Gardens of Stone National Park which needs protection.

The Gardens of Stone National Park lies to the north west of my electorate and shares a boundary with the World Heritage-listed Blue Mountains National Park. Among others, both the Blue Mountains Conservation Society and the Colong Foundation for Wilderness are active in advocacy and policy development, as well as physical remediation and protection of wilderness areas.

Presently there are a number of threats to the health of our wilderness areas and attempts are afoot to weaken protections afforded by national park status. The Springvale and Clarence collieries, both operated by Centennial Coal, are at the edges of our national parks. In separate incidents, the mining company has caused considerable damage to our pristine wilderness areas. At Clarence Colliery, a coal fines spill in July 2015 saw dozens of kilometres of the Wollangambe River polluted with fine coal dust fibres after the collapse of a mining wastewater dam.

The collapse of the dam, located just 400 metres from the border of the World Heritage-listed national park, was described at the Land and Environment court yesterday as a "disaster waiting to happen".

Those are the words of Stephen Rushton, SC, appearing for the Environmental Protection Agency, which is seeking a \$2 million fine against Centennial Coal.

Centennial Coal is in court this week facing up to its role in an environmental disaster which should never have been allowed to happen. The management of the mining operator has been described in the Land and Environment court as incompetent.

Evidence is being given in that court that not only were their environmental and safety controls inadequate, but they were informal, verbal arrangements. This is not just incompetence, it is negligence. When I asked questions on notice of the Minister for Industry, Resources and Energy in November 2015 about what emergency response plans were in place at Clarence Colliery before the disaster, the Government could not say because it did not know.

It is unacceptable to me that this Government sees fit to stand back and let mining operators rip, without adequate oversight.

The New South Wales Government has also not done enough to rein in the environmental damage being done by the same operator at its Springvale mine, where it discharges highly saline effluent water into the waterways that run through the Blue Mountains National Park and then feed into Sydney's drinking water supply at Lake Burragorang.

The mining operator was licking its lips when the Hon. Gladys Berejiklian reshuffled the ministerial decks. In the chaos of Mike Baird's premature retirement, the mining industry saw an opportunity to improve its bottom line at the expense of the environment and at the expense of Sydney's drinking water catchment. They boasted of lobbying the now Minister for the Environment, Gabrielle Upton, to dilute environmental restrictions on their operation at Springvale mine.

As a result of this boast I wrote to the Minister for the Environment and asked her to put in writing a commitment to ensure Springvale mine was held to its earlier commitments and that the salinity of its effluent discharge was reduced rather than permitted to worsen.

Minister Upton declined to reply to my correspondence and referred it to a bureaucrat for a reply. That is the level of interest from the Liberal Government about the environment; it has no environmental credentials.

I also wonder if the refusal by the Minister to sign off on that correspondence is a strategic decision to avoid making a written commitment to environmental protections for the Blue Mountains National Park.

The threats to our national parks come not just from incompetent mining company managers or Minister Upton's lack of interest in her ministerial responsibilities. I note that a draft destination management plan commissioned by the Blue Mountains City Council has recommended converting visitor facilities into premium guest chalets. Neither the Blue Mountains Conservation Society nor the Colong Foundation for Wilderness, key stakeholders in our region, was consulted in the drafting of this plan. Had they been they would have loudly and thoroughly condemned such a proposal as being a reckless and unprecedented move away from conservation principles being at the forefront National Parks and Wildlife's purpose and activities.

That is what we must focus on.

This Government should be committing to acts of preservation, especially around Gardens of Stone.