



Officials gagged over mine fears

Ben Cubby
March 1, 2010 - 3:00AM

CRITICAL infrastructure supplying Sydney's drinking water is likely to be damaged by vast new coalmines planned for the city's south-western outskirts, government agencies have told the Planning Assessment Commission.

But government staff who raised serious concerns about the environmental impact were told by senior bureaucrats not to present their objections at a public hearing, according to memos obtained by the *Herald*.

They show senior public servants were allowed to present to the Planning Assessment Commission's panel of mining and environment experts in private, rather than at a public Planning Assessment Commission hearing in February.

BHP Billiton also made its presentation to the panel in private.

In its submission, the Sydney Catchment Authority said the new BHP Billiton mines could cause the Upper Canal near Campbelltown to overflow as the earth cracks and shifts on the surface above the mine. The walls of the canal, which links Sydney's main Prospect Reservoir to dams south of the city, will be at risk of collapse, while the agency said it was "not satisfied" that several other dams, tunnels, weirs and aqueducts would remain "safe and serviceable".

Some of the water flowing into the main dams that supply southern Sydney and Wollongong is also likely to be contaminated by the effects of mining, though the impurities will probably be diluted to negligible levels, it said.

Other agencies, including Industry and Investment NSW and the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water, offered equally scathing and detailed criticism of the \$60-billion plan, which is being assessed.

The submissions put several government agencies on a collision course with BHP Billiton, which says the financial viability of its entire operation in the Bulli Seam mines around Appin would be compromised if mining is scaled back further.

Longwall mining can crack rivers and drain swamps as the earth above longwall mine panels warps and splits, but BHP Billiton believes that, based on experience with other mines in NSW, most damage can be repaired.

The company has already agreed not to mine under some of the more endangered rivers in the proposed 220-square kilometre mining zone, leaving buffer zones that largely comply with the recommendations of the 2008 Southern Coalfields Inquiry.

But the catchment authority examined BHP Billiton's proposal and concluded that the ground could sink or tilt over a metre around the Upper Canal because of mining, and this was "likely to result in the canal overflowing", and "fracturing could result in increased leakage or collapse of the canal wall."

The Nepean tunnel, which is the main conduit for water supply to the Macarthur district, was also in serious danger of cracking and damage, the authority said.

Broughtons Pass Weir, described by the authority as "the most critical piece of infrastructure involved with sole supply of water to the Macarthur Area" could suffer damage that would not leave it "safe and serviceable".

Industry and Investment NSW did not object to the proposal going ahead, but said the company's proposed rehabilitation strategy was "inadequate".

"Public confidence takes a knock when government agencies that are critical of the project are heard behind closed doors," said the NSW Greens MP, Lee Rhiannon.

The commission is expected to report to government in April.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/water-issues/officials-gagged-over-mine-fears-20100228-pb6h.html>