

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF SUSTAINABILITY, ENVIRONMENT, WATER, POPULATION AND COMMUNITIES

Does the Federal Government support Queensland's policy of allowing mines to release mine legacy water into rivers?

- Managing mine water releases is primarily a state government responsibility. Where mine water releases are needed, including during exceptional flooding events, these need to be carefully considered, including any cumulative impacts on the environment.
- The Australian Government provides strong legislative protections for matters of national environmental significance, through the thorough and rigorous assessment of projects.
- The department is currently investigating the water discharge activities of up to 27 mines to ensure there has been no breach of national environment law.

Is there enough science on this, to say that it's safe and doesn't impact on the world heritage listed area of the Great Barrier Reef?

- The department is unaware of the details of any assessments undertaken prior to the state approving the release of this mine water.
- The Australian Government seeks expert technical and scientific advice wherever needed to assist in the assessment of potential impacts on federally protected matters. Expert advice is often sought in assessing potential impacts on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.
- The Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development considers and provides expert advice on water-related impacts of large coal mining projects to the Australian Government (*and Queensland Government*) as requested. This is to ensure that Commonwealth environmental assessments decisions are informed by science and independent expert advice.
- When requesting advice from the Independent Expert Scientific Committee, the Commonwealth would ask the committee to consider any potential water-related impacts on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area if this is a controlling provision of the project.

When you are assessing mining development proposals, is runoff and possible flooding of the mine considered when determining whether a mine proposal should be approved or not?

- Where runoff and possible flooding from a mining proposal is likely to have a significant impact on matters of national environmental significance, proposed flood mitigation actions will be considered during the assessment process.
- As part of the assessment process, the Commonwealth will also consider any advice requested from the Independent Expert Scientific Committee on water-related impacts.

Is mine runoff considered a problem for the reef in the same way agricultural runoff is? (If so why wasn't it mentioned in the UNESCO statement the government addressed on February 1?)

- The scientific consensus to date on water quality in the Great Barrier Reef indicates that agricultural land use is a key factor affecting the health of catchment run off into the Great Barrier reef. The Government is addressing this issue through its Caring for our Country Reef Rescue initiative.
- Mine runoff would, if likely to impact on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, be subject to the same rigorous environmental assessment as other potential impacts, as described in the state party report submitted to the World Heritage Committee on 1 February. Potential impacts on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area would depend on where the mine was situated and whether any run-off was likely to enter the Reef.

What can or can't the federal government do about mine legacy water problems in active and abandoned mines? (ie the pits fill up in flood time). Is this a problem being recognised?

- The impacts associated with mine legacy water are the subject of growing concern. This is primarily a responsibility for the states in their broader regulatory responsibility over the mining industry.
- The Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 provides exemptions for actions which pre-date the Act, or which hold prior environmental authorisations. Issues associated with mine legacy water are generally caused by older mines which are subject to these exemptions.
- In relation to current or future mine proposals, the Australian Government provides strong legislative protections for matters of national environmental significance, through the thorough and rigorous assessment of projects.
- The department is currently investigating the water discharge activities of up to 27 mines to ensure there has been no breach of national environment law.

Is there a national standard for rehabilitating disused mines and treating the hazards left behind ? ... and if not, should there be?

- The arrangements for mine decommissioning and rehabilitation, including the treatment of pit voids, are carefully considered during the assessment process under national environment law, specifically when this relates to the ongoing protection of matters of national environmental significance.
- The Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism provides a handbook addressing mine rehabilitation.

Can you comment on the following recommendation from the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry. What's being done to make sure that this collaboration happens?

"The Queensland Government should work collaboratively with the Commonwealth Government and mine operators to ensure co-ordinated and effective monitoring of salts, metals and other contaminants in marine environments that may be affected by mine discharges."

- The Australian Government set up the Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Development to provide expert advice on water-related impacts of large coal mining projects to both the Australian and Queensland Governments as requested. This is to ensure that both governments' environmental assessments decisions are informed by science and independent expert advice.