

# Mining proposals are polarising communities

by Nick G

**Two new iron ore mines proposed for South Australia have raised a raft of environmental concerns and exposed contradictions between rural residents and miners.**

The first comes from a newly formed alliance of mining companies focussing on the Braemar region, which runs about 250 kilometres west and south of Broken Hill. It is estimated that the combined projects will need investment capital of \$7.5 billion, much of which is expected to be sourced from China.

The Braemar deposits are estimated at 40 billion tonnes, with up to 50 million tonnes expected to be mined annually. The proposal requires significant infrastructure, including a 50 Gegalitre desalination plant, and either a rail line to Port Pirie or a slurry pipeline.

The desalination plant seems to make a slurry pipe more of a possibility than rail haulage. If a pipe is constructed to carry water for mineral extraction from Spencers Gulf to the Braemar mines, then it lessens the draw on water from the underground aquifers which pastoralists are desperate to maintain for their own purposes.

A slurry pipeline is cheaper to operate and employs fewer people than rail haulage operations, but it requires lots of water. The water is mixed with mineral concentrate near the mine and pumped to a port facility, where a filter press is used to remove the water from the slurry prior to the concentrate being placed on board ships.

The technology is not unknown in Australia. The 85km Savage River Slurry Pipeline in Tasmania, built in 1967, was one of the first in the world.

## Questions that need answers

Questions being asked by environmentalists include how the waste water from the slurry is to be treated, where, and with what impact on local ecologies?

Questions are also being asked about the desalination plant proposal. A spokesperson for the miners conceded that a desalination plant in Spencer Gulf would be controversial, particularly because the proposed 100Gt/year plant proposed by BHP Billiton at Point Lowly near Whyalla would already be discharging brine into the gulf. There are minimal ocean currents in the Gulf, and brine discharges threaten both the commercial fishing industry and tourism operators who bring recreational divers in during the giant cuttlefish breeding season.

## More questions at Tumby Bay

The second proposal is for a magnetite mine near Tumby Bay on the western side of Spencer Gulf, about 45km north of Port Lincoln. This is to be developed as a partnership between Chinese company Wuhan Iron and Steel Co. (60%) and Centrex Metals (40%). Centrex's second and third largest shareholders are Wugang Australia Resources (wholly-owned by Wuhan Iron and Steel) and Baotou Iron and Steel, another Chinese state-owned enterprise.

Again, a desalination plant and a

slurry pipeline are part of the proposal.

Already there is a local group, Saving Our Sustainability, acting against the miners. A spokesperson for the group said "Their threat to the water-holes, to the water supply, the underground water, the Todd River itself (a source of water for Port Lincoln and nearby towns) has yet to be addressed... Their long-term destruction to the water tables is irreparable if what our modelling is showing is going to happen."

The SOS group says SA Water already struggles to maintain local supplies from underground aquifers, and mining could tip the region over the edge.

"Mining is short-term, some mines

only last 20 years. Is it worth risking the sustainability of the water supply for the whole peninsula for some commercial interests and for overseas export into China?" he said.

Sensitivities around these sorts of issues at the moment is such that the NSW-based Lock the Gate Alliance, which is opposing coal seam gas expansion, has given publicity and support to the Tumby Bay group.

Enthusiasm for the much-vaunted mining boom in South Australia is by no means universal. Contradictions arising from mining expansion provide both challenges and opportunities for our work amongst the people.

## Trampling on Aboriginal history

-Contributed-

**Fortescue Metals Group has been accused of forcing an archaeologist to change her report on Aboriginal heritage sites in the Western Australia Pilbara region, to clear the way for their Solomon Hub iron ore mine.**

A media statement issued by the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation states, in part...

"The Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation is calling on Tony Burke, Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities to take action under the emergency powers of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act to stop the destruction by Fortescue Metals Group (FMG) of Yindjibarndi sacred sites and 'living heritage' areas that are used by Yindjibarndi people each year for their Birdarra religious ceremonies, which date back thousands of years.

"The Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation has received evidence showing FMG forced heritage consultants to change a heritage report about the significance of the area by threatening to withhold payments on their invoices "if we did not comply" with FMG's request. The 'unedited' report also pointed out that a consultant anthropologist engaged by FMG to assess the ethnographic significance of the area, had spoken only to a breakaway group of Yindjibarndi people who support FMG but who know nothing about the area; and that this consultant had failed to take into account the evidence given to and accepted by the NNTT concerning the significance of the sites for religious ceremonies.

"In its rush to develop its Firetail mine in the Solomon Project, FMG has abused the process of heritage protection, and now has damaged an

ochre quarry and an ancient creek bed where we collect sacred stones and ochre each year for our ceremonies",

"Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation CEO, Michael Woodley, said. "FMG can't deny knowing about these sites because we have been fighting about them for nearly three years, first in the Native Title Tribunal and then in the Federal Court."

"In a judgement delivered on 12 August 2011, regarding the validity of the grant of the Firetail mining lease to FMG by the WA State government, the Full Court of the Federal Court confirmed that it had been accepted by all parties that the collection of sacred stones and ochre from sites within this lease are religious practices; and those practices would be prevented if FMG was allowed to mine the Firetail area.

"Despite this clear acknowledgement, the Full Court held that the National Native Title Tribunal (NNTT) had acted correctly in allowing the grant this mining lease because the WA Aboriginal Heritage Act protects all Aboriginal sites; and FMG could therefore not damage these Yindjibarndi sites without first obtaining the consent of the Minister.

"On 23 October YAC representatives travelled to the Firetail lease to check on the safety of their sites, but were denied access by FMG security guards for "safety reasons", because a blasting program and massive ground disturbance were under way.

"On 28 October Michael Woodley took time out from Birdarra ceremonies to travel to the area with other senior Yindjibarndi Lawmen, avoiding FMG checkpoints by using an ancient "freeway" – known only to the most senior carriers of Yindjibarndi law. To their horror they found the landscape mutilated and sites damaged.

"Mr Woodley said, "FMG has done this against all warnings and advice from the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation, the authorised representative of the Yindjibarndi people. They were clearly advised by the Minister that they should conduct heritage surveys with YAC but have failed to do so. Instead they have given misleading reports to the APMC and DIA designed to confuse the regulatory process, and to dismiss the religious, cultural and historic importance of our sacred sites in the Firetail lease."

"YAC has tried to negotiate an agreement with FMG that is in line with mining industry standards for compensation, and that ensures comprehensive surveys and protection measures for Yindjibarndi culture are in place before mining commences.

"However, instead of negotiating an equitable heritage and land access agreement, FMG have implemented a series of divide and conquer actions designed to break the will of the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation by seeding misinformation and fear in the community; and unleashing a program of SLAP (Strategic Litigation Against Plaintiffs) actions that are having enormous impact on YAC finances and its ability to deal with an unrelenting barrage of administrative and legal issues.

"These events show FMG conduct to be unethical and in breach of the State Aboriginal Heritage Act. FMG's conduct is a direct assault on the 40,000 year-old traditions and heritage of the Yindjibarndi people and contravenes the most fundamental international human rights covenants. These actions by FMG demand that Federal Minister Tony Burke uses his power to stop FMG's massive program of sites violation."