

# The Canberra Times

## This mine should have been given a clear 'no' years ago

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August 31 2024

As the catastrophic impacts of climate change unfold, Australia remains a major global contributor to climate harm as one of the three largest exporters of fossil fuels. Rapid and just transition from fossil fuels to renewables has never been more urgent.

Global decarbonisation is a huge opportunity for Australia to become a world leader in the deployment of renewable energy as we transition our energy system from coal and gas, and in the production of the critical minerals needed to build renewables and the processing of these domestically pre-export using clean energy.

In this context, there has been heated debate recently about mining proposals that have been knocked back in some form: in particular, [Regis Resources' plans for gold mine tailings to be dumped at the culturally significant headwaters of the Belubula River](#) near Blayney in NSW. [Bowdens' proposal for a lead, zinc and silver mine within two kilometres of a primary school near Mudgee](#) is another.

These decisions are a case in point that, despite the imperative to decarbonise, the green economy cannot "green light" all forms of mining.

There are some mines that are plainly unacceptable from an environmental, social, First Nations, biodiversity or economic perspective, and should have never made it past the first hurdle. Further, some mines are not actually required for the renewables build out at all.

Regis' plans to build a thirsty gold mine in a region that already suffers from high water stress, and dump tailings at the headwaters of the Belubula River, should have been given a clear "no" back in 2018 when it was first proposed. It's hardly surprising that the mine has faced significant challenges since then.



Regis office in Blayney and, inset, the Belubula River.

Equally, it's not difficult to see why Bowdens' 2016 plans to build a lead mine next to a primary school have struggled to get off the ground.

Mining companies and governments ignore obvious early warnings about projects from communities at their peril. A properly functioning approvals system would see projects designed to avoid sensitive locations. Unresolvable conflicts would be identified before obviously flawed proposals get too far down the planning pipeline, and before governments and investors pour in more time or money.

Predictably, lobbyists for the mining industry blame host communities and "greenies" for project failures. The knee-jerk response is to pressure governments to cut people out of planning.

Yet, both Regis and Bowdens suffered years of delay at the proponents' end before communities were invited to engage, and they both gained planning approval soon after public hearings, despite fundamental flaws.

An energy transition that is [shaped by and with host communities](#), with access to independent advice and merits appeal rights within the legal system, is one that is ultimately more likely to be accepted by communities. This, and a robust environmental assessment process, is the pathway to a faster, fairer and more sustainable transition.

As the concurrent climate, energy and [cost-of-living crises](#) accelerate, a just transition is also one that delivers, without delay, the community benefits of low-cost renewable energy and decreased carbon pollution. However, what we have seen in Australia to date is chronic planning, assessment and deployment delays and bottlenecks on renewable energy projects. These delays are happening while the project still sits with the proponent, and well before host communities are asked to engage. They have compromised the pace of our energy system transition, locking us into hyperinflated, volatile, climate-destroying fossil fuels for longer.

If Australia is to achieve its emissions reduction and renewable energy targets, we need better planning and approval processes that enable the rollout of renewable energy, while respecting the rights of people and nature.

[Climate Energy Finance](#) has called for the introduction of overriding public interest (OPI) principles, such as those implemented in the EU, into environmental approval processes for renewable energy, grid infrastructure and battery storage developments.

These should be designed to simplify, streamline and shorten permit-granting procedures, so that projects which are unacceptable on Environmental Social and Governance (ESG) grounds are ruled out quickly, and others of strategic significance are able to proceed to deployment in a timeframe aligned with the climate science. For example, permit-granting processes may not exceed 12 months for clean energy developments in the EU equivalent of our domestic Renewable Energy Zones.

Importantly, this doesn't mean cutting people out of planning. Rather, the OPI test should be accompanied by rigorous, early stakeholder engagement that centres community voices and embeds principles for benefit sharing to communities, landholders and, critically, traditional owners. This should include equity participation, fair payment for access to land, access to independent advice and merits-based appeals.

And all of the above, surely, is in everyone's best interests.

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<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8747457/regis-mine-highlights-need-to-transition-from-fossil-fuels/?cs=14246>