



'Irreversible consequences': Adani coalmine granted unlimited water access for 60 years

Environmental and legal groups fear impact on groundwater and accuse Queensland government of giving Indian mining company special treatment

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Adani's controversial \$21bn Carmichael coalmine has been granted an unlimited 60-year water licence in what environmental and legal groups say is another example of governments giving the company special treatment.

The associated water licence, signed by a Queensland government representative the day after Cyclone Debbie tore through the state's north, allows Adani Mining to take water from or near the Betts Creek formation when removing or draining water from the mine.

The licence acknowledges this will "have an impact on the underground water levels in the region of the mine" both during and after the planned Carmichael coalmine's years of operation.

"Certainly the severe implications are that if the groundwater is taken, then it's not available for other more long-term or sustainable uses," said Jo-Anne Bragg, the chief executive and

solicitor at the Environment Defenders Office Queensland. “This would be an irreversible serious consequence of these enormous coalmines.”

Adani’s permit is valid through to 2077 and its 100 conditions provide no volumetric limits on the amount of groundwater, or any triggers to halt mining operations. It rather requires Adani to monitor the effects of its project on water levels and respond with “make-good agreements” with any affected landholders.

Environmental and legal groups said that would potentially be too late to reverse any damage caused to the region’s farms and land titles. “Our experience is that this is no substitute for sustainable water resources for landowners,” Bragg said.

“There’s an issue about whether this controversial company will even be in existence to honour make-good agreements over that time and practical issues such as where the water would be supplied from.”

An accompanying environmental impact statement reportedly includes a prediction from Adani that by 2029 it will be drawing 26m litres of water a day, and about 355bn litres over its lifetime.

A campaigner at the Australian Conservation Foundation, Basha Stasak, said: “The primary concern is that there are no trigger thresholds or, if you prefer another word, impact thresholds, which require a cessation of mining.

“The concerns we have is that even at the levels they’re saying they need it’s not clear what the impacts would be.”

Stasak said it was concerning the process was “obscure and opaque”.

“Best practice should certainly be addressing some very clear standards around what the impacts will be and being very clear on how they are mitigating against them ... and where the risks are too high,” Stasak said.

“At minimum Adani should be required to play by the same rules as everyone else and not be given special treatment. We are not talking best practice we are talking minimum standard.”

Adani’s water licence is not subject to the scrutiny measures brought in with amendments to Queensland’s Water Act last year.

Under its exceptions, the company is not required to take public submissions or appeals, which Bragg also described as “special treatment”, given that other proposed mines - including the much smaller the New Acland project - are bound by the requirements.

“They lobbied politicians from all parties in Queensland to have a special case made for Adani Carmichael, even though other Mega Galilee mines ... do need to have public submissions and appeals,” she said.

“Really it’s just shocking that the Queensland community won’t have an opportunity on the merits to scrutinise this associated water licence with groundwater experts and point out the weaknesses in this licence.”

Ariane Wilkinson, a lawyer from Environmental Justice Australia, said there were also other areas of concern, including the lack of any need under Queensland's Environmental Protection Act for the government to consider the history of Adani and its related companies' alleged foreign environment law offences.

"It goes completely under the radar," Wilkinson said. "In Australia Adani has not demonstrated that it can comply with environmental laws and regulations while embarking on a project of anything like the size and scale of Carmichael.

"In India Adani has taken on projects of this scale and risk and we know that it has been found guilty of serious environmental breaches and has a terrible track record in its home country."

Queensland's natural resources and mines minister, Anthony Lynham, defended the licence and said more than 100 of the 270 conditions on the project applied to groundwater.

"These safeguards will ensure that water resources are protected, and that this critical project progresses sustainably," he said.

Lynham said the licences provided Adani with about 1% of what farmers are now able to use in the Burdekin catchment, and that Adani has to pay about three times what farmers do to use surface water.

"This project has been through extensive scrutiny by state and federal governments," he said. "The community and many of these groups have had their say, many times."

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