

Mine approval means short term gain for long-term pain

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Concerns are growing over the approval for an expanded mine tailings dam on the headwaters of East Gippsland's Tambo River.

Earth Resources Victoria has approved an application, by mining company Round Oak, to greatly extend operations of a tailings dam that is likely to fail in the future, according to conservation groups.

"This approval is disappointing and concerning. The expanded tailings dam is all about short term gain, with the real possibility of long term pain if the dam leaks or collapses", says VNPA spokesperson Phil Ingamells.

The Stockman zinc and copper mine, situated at the headwaters of East Gippsland's Tambo River, has been closed since 1998 when the original operator went into liquidation, leaving a large earthen-walled tailings dam leaking acidic waste.

The Victorian Government then took responsibility for the dam's integrity, and spent \$6.9 million trying to stabilise the dam wall, before excluding the tailings dam area from any future mining lease.

Round Oak now plans to reopen the mine and expand the tailings dam capacity by extending the height of the earthen tailings dam wall to about 40 metres, approaching the height of the MCG's stands.

"The original dam wall, which must form the foundation of the extended wall, is lined with a disintegrating membrane that is unlikely to last for more than 20 years. Failure of the dam could mean the release of acidic and toxic mine waste into the Tambo River and the internationally significant Gippsland Lakes", says Mr Ingamells. The Environmental Effects Statement for the Stockman mine has said

"... the consequences of an unplanned release remain significant".

The Victorian National Parks Association is concerned that the mine's operators have been placed under no obligation to fix the dam wall before it is extended.

Though liability for the tailings dam remains with the mining company during the 6-7 years in which it will operate, after the mine's closure responsibility for the dam wall reverts to the Victorian Government.

"The dam, which is meant to hold toxic mine tailings for at least 1,000 years, could join a growing list of tailings dam failures around the world", says Mr Ingamells. "This approval threatens the Tambo River, and leaves a long-term liability with the Victorian Government."

For comment or further information

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