

Many risks associated with proposed mining

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AS CHALICE Mining attempts to introduce a large-scale nickel, copper and platinum group elements (PGE) project into the Shires of Toodyay and Chittering, communities and environmental advocates are growing concerned about the potential environmental, social and commercial impacts.

At the heart of these concerns is the proposed mine's location on the Darling Escarpment adjacent to the Julimar Forest in the Avon and Brockman River catchments, areas of critical environmental importance.

The project threatens not only local ecosystems but also the health of the broader environment and the community.

The region is home to several threatened and endangered species and some may not survive large-scale mining.

While the company promises economic benefits, the long-term risks to biodiversity, the local economy, and social structures may outweigh these short-term financial gains.

Here's why the community should take these risks seriously.

Environmental Impacts

JULIMAR Forest which sits right next to Chalice Mining's proposed initial open-pit operation, and is the focus of the company's second stage of mining, is part of the internationally recognised Southwest Australian biodiversity hotspot.

This forest hosts an array of native plant and animal species, being the habitat for several endangered species including the Western Ringtail Possum (critically endangered), Carnaby's Black Cockatoo (endangered), Chuditch (vulnerable) and the Forest Red-tailed Black Cockatoo (threatened).

Forest degradation through hydrological disruption from mine dewatering, 24/7 noise and dust, and light pollution from mining operations could disrupt breeding patterns and force wildlife into unsuitable habitats contributing to their extinction.

Another critical concern is the Avon and Brockman River catchments which serve as key water sources for local ecosystems and human communities.

The catchments feed the Swan River system and are integral to the health of the region including Avon National Park.

Nickel and copper mining pose a risk of water pollution through tailings which are the by-products of mining that often contain toxic chemicals such as sulfuric acid and heavy metals.

Even with advanced containment technologies, tailings can leach into surrounding soil and water systems over time, posing a long-term risk to ecosystems and human health.

Waste dumps proposed by Chalice Mining also create a risk of acid run off into the



Photograph of an open pit mine in the Darling Ranges - indicative of the scale of such mining operations. Photo: Clair Medhurst.

catchment, threatening critical habitats for waterbirds and fish populations.

Social Impacts, Commercial Risks and Long-term Viability

TOODYAY and Chittering have long been treasured for their peaceful rural settings, agricultural productivity and natural beauty.

Attempting to retrofit industrial mining into the area will alter this way of life bringing with it major social disruption.

Increased traffic from mining vehicles, noise pollution and dust are just the beginning and are already being experienced on properties near Chalice Mining's exploration activities irrevocably altering the character of these close-knit communities.

Chalice Mining's proposal includes procuring water supply via a new multi-million-dollar pipeline from Alkimos.

To be clear, this level of investment makes it inevitable that the initial Gonnevill mine will be the first stage, with mining extending into the Julimar Forest to underpin the feasibility of Chalice's investment.

Tourism is another major economic driver in the region.

Visitors are drawn to Chittering and Toodyay's picturesque landscapes, agricultural/farm-to-plate experiences, peaceful environment offering outdoor activities such as stargazing and bush-walking close to Perth.

Turning the region into an industrial mining zone will irrevocably change this experience, deterring tourists, driving away lifestyle investors, reducing income streams for local businesses and negatively impacting tourism investment and the local economy.

The negative impact on land values could be significant.

Damage is already occurring through the lengthy exploration and feasibility process undertaken by Chalice since 2020 placing

Toodyay and Chittering in planning 'limbo' until at least 2030.

Agriculture has been the backbone of the economy in Toodyay and Chittering for generations.

Local farmers rely on clean water, healthy soils and stable climates to produce crops and raise livestock.

Mining jeopardises these essential resources.

The competition for water, contamination risks, and the potential for soil degradation all pose threats to the viability of local food-growers.

Aluminium-rich dust from mining activities will settle on food crops, pastures and rooftops, affecting the quality and yield of agricultural produce and the safety of drinking water.

Mining especially nickel mining, is a notoriously volatile industry.

Global commodity prices fluctuate based on factors outside local control and communities bear the brunt.

Prime examples are BHP's WA Nickel projects, recently closed for at least 3 years, and the Ravensthorpe Nickel mine, recently closed for the third time since opening in 2009.

Communities that become reliant on mining find themselves facing economic hardship when prices drop or when the mine closes.

By contrast, agriculture, tourism and lifestyle investment, when managed sustainably, offer more consistent, long-term economic stability.

These industries can support communities for generations, providing a steady source of income without the boom-and-bust cycle that characterises the nickel industry.

Chalice Mining's first stage Gonnevill project is currently going through a

feasibility study, including an environmental assessment via a Public Environmental Review (PER) process overseen by the State's Environmental Protection Authority (EPA).

Some residents of Chittering might remember going through this process before – a record-breaking three-year PER was undertaken from 2010-2013 in relation to proposed bauxite mining.

In the end the proponent, Bauxite Alumina JV, withdrew from the process due to overwhelming opposition from the local community.

In 2019, during the process of updating Chittering's Local Planning Strategy, the WA Department of Mines determined that the Chittering/ Toodyay region should become a mining province, despite its unique environmental values and fast-growing popularity as an agri-tourism and lifestyle destination.

The EPA decided on a PER process for Chalice Mining's Gonnevill project in March 2024

The EPA assessment process is not yet 'active' but when it is, it is important that concerned residents in Chittering and Toodyay participate by attending public forums and making written submissions.

In the meantime, the Chittering and Toodyay communities are becoming used to the continuing PR campaign by Chalice Mining via their regular newsletters which profess concern about issues such as Jarrah dieback – even though mining is the biggest cause of dieback spread in the southern Darling Ranges – and publicising donations to community groups.

This is the same PR campaign that the Bauxite Alumina JV used in the 2010s.

Conclusion

THE RISKS associated with Chalice Mining's proposed nickel/copper project adjacent to the Julimar Forest in our river catchments are far-reaching.

Some impacts, such as industrial noise, dust and increased traffic are already being experienced from exploration activity over the past five years.

From the potential destruction of critical habitats for endangered species to the contamination of vital water sources and the disruption of local economies, the costs of this project will be borne by the environment and the people who live in the region for generations.

It's time for a serious conversation about whether the short-term economic gains of mining are worth the long-term environmental, social and commercial costs.

The Toodyay and Chittering communities made their views very clear about this back in the 2010s and they deserve better than to be transformed in the 21st century into yet another casualty of industrial exploitation.

Let's protect our biodiversity, preserve our rural way of life, and secure a sustainable future for generations to come.