



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

Coal mining in South Africa is threatening food security

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The cumulative impact of coal mining in Mpumalanga in South Africa on water, land and air is seriously affecting the country's food security, says Bench Marks Foundations in a research report released in Johannesburg today.

The report, *Policy Gap 9 on South African Coal Mining: Corporate Grievance Mechanisms, Community Engagement Concerns and Mining Impacts*, focuses on communities near mines in the Nkangala District including Witbank (eMalahleni) and Middelburg (Steve Tshwete) in South Africa and on two mining corporations, Anglo American Corporation and BHP Billiton.

"Mpumalanga is at the heart of South Africa's maize triangle and coal mining is drastically reducing the land available for the growth of maize and it is also destroying the water required for farming," says John Capel, Executive Director for the Bench Marks Foundation.

"The severe air pollution experienced in the area also affects cattle's drinking water which in turn affects milk production and quality. Farmers in the area have told our researchers that the combination of air pollution and water pollution can also impact on the fertility and ability of the cattle to reproduce."

According to the Bench Marks report, in an average year, the BHP Billiton Middelburg mine alone, resulted in the removal of 6 million cubic metres of topsoil, used 65.6 million kilograms of explosives, resulted in 2.5 million metres of drilling, resulted in 125 million cubic metres of overburden removed; and resulted in 339 hectares of disturbed land requiring rehabilitation.

The report quotes information from the Bureau of Food and Agriculture Production that states that if the current mining areas are overlaid with the latest field crop boundaries, a total of 326,022 hectares of farmland will be lost to mining and a further 439,577 hectares are at risk if the prospecting area is also transferred. That means that an area of 765,599 hectares of cultivated land would be lost if all mining activities are taken into account.

"This loss of land will result in a drastic reduction in the production of maize, which is the staple food of the majority of our citizens, and will escalate food prices.

"Furthermore, the continuous mine blasting is destroying farmer's boreholes, and polluting the water. Water is turning red, and is unfit for agricultural use, never mind domestic use.

"Farmers are concerned that the full extent of the impact on water quantity and quality are still to be determined. Changes in the sulphur, calcium and pH levels can have a significant impact on farming," says Capel.

The report indicates that when pH levels drop to lower than 6.6, it has a significant impact on the irrigation of maize. Magnesium levels in the ground water will also affect milk production and meat quality. High calcium levels will affect the growth of calves and skull formation.

"And the costs of constantly repairing the lining of the boreholes in the farming community, and the purchasing of expensive filters, will also impact on food prices as these costs will be transferred to the consumer," says Capel.

When asked by Bench Marks' researchers what measures have been taken with regard to measuring seepage into groundwater by the coal mines, the corporations said that they have put test boreholes in place around pits.

"What farmers do not know is that these well fields around open pits are often used to drop the water table to ensure that mining operations occur in dry conditions. Farmers are already concerned that their boreholes are deeper than the mine pits. This difference could mean that mine seepage occurs into these boreholes.

Apart from the impact of mining on water and air quality affecting agricultural production and the loss of agricultural land, the report shows that farmers are also complaining about the concept of the original landowner being responsible for the relocation of his farm labourers, and not the mines, the impact of mining on service roads, the devaluation of farm land surrounded by mining operations, the loss of fertile topsoil due to the nature of open cast mining and the increased levels of crime, theft of crops and livestock due to an influx of people attracted by mining into the area.

The research showed that many of the smaller farms along the supply roads to Kendal and Ogies, have converted their land into truck stops and switched from farming to transport operations servicing the man collieries in the area.

"All of these factors are contributing to the threat to our food security," says Capel.

Bench Marks' report also shows that farming exports are also affected by the influx of collieries with many vegetable farmers downstream from the mines in the Kendal Ogies area losing European clients due to the bad quality of water used for irrigation.

"The European Union will not accept produce watered with recycled water, or mine polluted water" says Capel. "It requires that clean water is used. Therefore, the bad water quality in this area is starting to impact on our economy.

"We strongly recommend that the Department of Water Affairs goes beyond just studying the problem of mine water decant into the water systems of the country and starts to prosecute those responsible for the pollution of these systems".

Capel continues to say that the loss of top soil is of grave concern to farmers.

"Government needs to look into this increasing loss and realise what a huge threat it and pollution is to water and food security. They must take this more seriously!

"Failing which, we don't hold much hope for the farming community in this area, never mind the rest of South Africa".

To download the report and to view Bench Marks Foundation's other research reports, go to www.bench-marks.org.za.

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Bench Marks Foundation is an independent non-governmental organisation mandated by churches to monitor the practices of multi-national corporations to

- ensure they respect human rights;
- protect the environment;
- ensure that profit-making is not done at the expense of other interest groups; and
- ensure that those most negatively impacted upon are heard, protected and accommodated within the business plans of the corporations.

The Foundation was launched in 2001 and the Rt Rev Dr Jo Seoka chairs the organisation.

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