

Media Briefing

Whitehaven coal mine

West Cumbria Mining Ltd (WCM) want to build a new coal mine just south of Whitehaven. This would be the UK's first new deep coal mine for 30 years and is intended to provide coking coal for the steel industry until 2049.

Friends of the Earth believes the mine must not be built:

- The coal produced will increase global carbon emissions at a time when scientists have just delivered the starkest warning yet about the climate crisis.
- The steel industry is looking to decarbonise and is moving away from coal.
- There are better ways to provide the jobs that are needed in west Cumbria.

How have we got here?

WCM first published proposals for the mine in 2016. Cumbria County Council provisionally granted planning permission in October 2020. The government initially refused to intervene but, following domestic¹ and international² concern about the mine's climate change impacts and a direct intervention by the chair of the Climate Change Committee³, Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick changed his mind in March 2021 and 'called in' the proposal, triggering a public inquiry. This will start on 7th September and will last around four weeks. The inquiry inspector will make a recommendation to Mr Jenrick, with a final decision expected by Spring 2022.

Coal and steel

Globally, around 70% of steel is currently produced using coal⁴. The steel industry produces 7-9% of total global carbon emissions⁵, so it's a vital sector to decarbonise. We need steel to produce wind turbines, trains, buses etc – but it must be green steel.

WCM want to extract up to 2.78 million tonnes of coal a year until 2049⁶. They plan to sell 360,000 tonnes (13%) a year to British Steel in Scunthorpe and Tata Steel in Port Talbot⁷, but British Steel have said the sulphur content of WCM coal may be too high for them to use⁸. The vast majority of the coal (2.42 million tonnes per annum, or 87% of production) would be sold abroad, the main markets being 'Northern, Western. Southern Europe and Turkey'⁹.

WCM say their coal will replace coal imported from the US, cutting carbon emissions as the coal will not need to be shipped to Europe and the US mines will close down¹⁰. But the

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emissions gains from not shipping coal from the US are marginal – just 1.8% of the emissions from burning the coal¹¹. Also it seems unlikely that US mines will close - US exports of coking coal to China are increasing rapidly¹². Thus, the Whitehaven mine will increase global coal supply. Indeed, WCM's expert witness for the public inquiry says that *'development of the mine would increase supply of low-cost HVA coal into the European market'*¹³.

It is not clear that there will be a market for WCM's coal in mainland Europe. Steel producers there are looking to move away from using coal to produce steel. Most of them favour hydrogen as an alternative and several pilot projects are already up-and-running¹⁴. Indeed, Swedish company Hybrit has made its first delivery of 'green steel' made without coal to car-maker Volvo¹⁵. And ArcelorMittal, one of the world's largest steel producers, has said that by 2025 its Sestao plant in Spain will operate completely using hydrogen generated from renewable energy to produce 1.6 million tonnes of steel¹⁶ (equivalent to 23% of UK steel production in 2019¹⁷).

New coal mines are not needed. The International Energy Agency, an intergovernmental body, has said that there is enough coking coal in mines already operating to meet global demand until 2050¹⁸. And the Climate Change Committee has said that coking coal use in steelmaking could be displaced completely by 2035¹⁹, only halfway through the mine's proposed lifetime.

Climate change

The latest report on climate change impacts from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was described by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres as a *'code red for humanity'*, who added that *"if we combine forces now, we can avert climate catastrophe. But ... there is no time for delay and no room for excuses"*²⁰.

Lord Deben, chair of the Climate Change Committee, has written that the Cumbria mine *"will increase global emissions and have an appreciable impact on the UK's legally binding carbon budgets"*²¹.

Boris Johnson has identified coal as one of his priorities for the COP 26 global climate talks in Glasgow in November, saying *'we want the developed world to kick the coal habit entirely by 2030'*²². The focus of the Prime Minister is on coal use for power generation, but Friends of the Earth believes that coal use for industry must also be ended.

The UK's credibility as COP hosts is being damaged by the refusal to rule out a new coal mine, according to some of our ambassadors²³. The government is also set to allow the new Cambo oil field²⁴ and is providing \$1 billion of support for a climate-wrecking liquified natural gas project in Mozambique²⁵.

Jobs

Lack of jobs in West Cumbria is a critical and urgent issue. But opening a coal mine is far from the best option. In a climate emergency, we need jobs that benefit the community

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now and in the future, providing secure Employment for years to come. It shouldn't be jobs or the environment – it can and must be both.

WCM say the mine will create up to 532 jobs²⁶ and has pledged that 80% of these will go to local people where possible²⁷ but there is no way to guarantee this. WCM say that relevant experience is needed for 81% of the jobs.

But there are alternatives. Cumbria Action for Sustainability has calculated that 9,000 green jobs could be created in Cumbria in the next 15 years, including 4,500 in West Cumbria. These would be in renewable energy, waste management, industry, retrofitting buildings and green transport²⁸. And further jobs could be created in sectors that we have come to value in the last 18 months such as health and social care. Friends of the Earth believes the government must urgently invest in green jobs in Cumbria.

For further information

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¹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/climate-change-tsar-alok-sharma-seethes-at-robert-jenrick-over-cumbria-coalmine-cqkzvt25b>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/feb/04/top-climate-scientist-warns-pm-over-contemptuous-cumbria-coalmine-plan>

³ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/letter-deep-coal-mining-in-the-uk/>

⁴ https://www.worldsteel.org/en/dam/jcr:16ad9bcd-dbf5-449f-b42c-b220952767bf/fact_raw+materials_2018.pdf

⁵ https://www.worldsteel.org/en/dam/jcr:228be1e4-5171-4602-b1e3-63df9ed394f5/worldsteel_climatechange_policy%2520paper.pdf

⁶ [West Cumbria Mining Statement of Case](#) para 6

⁷ [Cumbria CC Planning Officer's report 02.10.20](#) para 7.17 p20

⁸ [Cumbria CC Planning Officer's report 02.10.20](#) para 7.91 p32

⁹ [West Cumbria Mining Proof of Evidence of Jim Truman](#) para 5.5

<https://cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/538/28159/44426115622.pdf> p378

¹⁰ [Cumbria CC Planning Officer's report 02.10.20](#) para 7.72 p29

¹¹ <https://www.creds.ac.uk/cumbria-mine-is-there-a-technical-need-for-new-coal-mines-in-the-uk/>

¹² US coking coal exports to China in January-March 2021 were over 400% higher than in the same period in 2020

<https://www.eia.gov/coal/production/quarterly/pdf/qcr-all.pdf>

¹³ [West Cumbria Mining Proof of Evidence of Jim Truman](#) para 5.5

<https://cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/538/28159/44426115622.pdf> p379

¹⁴ <https://www.industrytransition.org/green-steel-tracker>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/aug/19/green-steel-swedish-company-ships-first-batch-made-without-using-coal>

¹⁶ <https://www.h2-view.com/story/arcelormittal-to-develop-the-worlds-first-full-scale-zero-carbon-emissions-steel-plant-using-hydrogen/>

¹⁷ UK production was 7 million tonnes <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7317/>

¹⁸ <https://www.iea.org/reports/net-zero-by-2050> p103

¹⁹ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/letter-deep-coal-mining-in-the-uk/>

²⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-58130705>

²¹ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/letter-deep-coal-mining-in-the-uk/>

²² <https://www.energynewsline.co.uk/energy-live-news/boris-johnson-we-are-going-to-be-extremely-bold-at-cop26/>

²³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-56223327>

²⁴ <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/climate/boris-johnson-not-aware-cambo-oil-plans-he-now>

²⁵ <https://friendsoftheearth.uk/climate/whats-happening-mozambique>

²⁶ https://www.westcumbriamining.com/wp-content/uploads/WCM-Factsheet_Employment_R50119.pdf

²⁷ [West Cumbria Mining Statement of Case](#) para 18

²⁸ <https://cafs.org.uk/2021/03/12/cumbria-could-create-9000-green-jobs-cafs-report-shows/>