



Campaign to Protect
Rural England

Opencast coal-mining

Opencast coal-mining has undergone a recent resurgence in the UK, mainly due to the increase in global coal and gas prices. Mining companies and power stations are increasingly looking to opencast mines to provide a cheaper supply of coal - expensive imports currently account for 70 % of coal burned in the UK.

Not only do opencast mines deface some of our finest landscapes and wreck tranquillity, they can have a devastating effect on nearby communities and wildlife, while hindering efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions.

The issues

The proportion of UK coal being mined from opencast sources has been increasing steadily. In the last two years, opencast output in England has risen from 1.2 to 1.8 million tonnes, an increase of 50%. This pattern is set to continue – a recent investigation by the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) showed that much of Northumberland would be covered by massive opencast mines, should applications to extract 20m tonnes of coal go ahead.

As well as the effects on landscapes, communities and wildlife, an increase in opencasting means that carbon emissions from coal will continue to contribute to climate change. Investment in new unabated coal contradicts government targets for an 80% cut in emissions enshrined in the Climate Change Act, and disturbingly recent decisions suggest that in practice, there is now a presumption in favour of coal.

The majority of local communities and local councils affected are overwhelmingly against new opencast mines. Local inquiries find that noise, pollution and disruption harm the health and recreation of residents, damage urban regeneration and discourage investment. Despite this, there is a worrying trend for the Government to overturn the decisions of County Councils and grant consent to damaging applications – notably at Cramlington in Northumberland and Smalley in Derbyshire.

This could set a very damaging precedent – local councils may now be unwilling to reject future opencast coal applications as they know that they risk the expense of lengthy planning appeals while any decision could simply be overturned at a national level.

Our view

We are fundamentally opposed to any new, unabated coal-fired power stations, as well as to opencast coal mining, in terms of CO₂ emissions as well as landscape impacts. Following the lead of CPRE Kent, we have expressed opposition to the Kingsnorth power plant application.

Recent CPRE branch activity on opencast coal mining

CPRE at a local level has continued to fight opencast coal mines, both on the grounds of carbon and their impact on local communities.

CPRE Durham reported a lull in applications between 1998 and 2005 as 'small' (500 acres) opencast operations became economically less attractive. This followed a period of 30 cases fought in under 30 years, with a success rate of over 60% of applications being refused.

The branch has seen a surge in activity since 2005, with three schemes currently being monitored (Park Wall North – awaiting application; Skones Park – withdrawn after CPRE submissions and awaiting a further application; Pont Valley – awaiting determination of application). In all cases branch campaigner Pitch Wilson, a veteran of over 30 opencast public inquiries, has made representations on behalf of CPRE and local community groups.

In **Northumberland**, the branch is fighting proposals on a number of fronts. Our South East Northumberland campaigner, Gareth Rudd, has made written objections to two recent applications: in 2006 to the Shotton Public Inquiry, on the grounds of Shotton's Green Belt location and impact of the proposed development on wildlife and the quality of life of local people; and in 2007 at the Portland Burn Inquiry, with particular concern for the effect on the nearby town of Ashington. The branch is dismayed that despite massive community campaigns, in both cases the Government has overturned the County Council's plans to reject the sites, both of which fell within an area of opencast 'restraint'.

In the Tynedale District, our campaigner Les Ashworth has recently submitted to the County Council a detailed objection to a proposed opencast mine at Halton Lea Gate. This objection cites the potential for contamination of Hartley Burn during the frequent periods of flooding in the area during heavy rainfall, impacts on local communities and tourism, and inadequate transport links.

CPRE Peak District and South Yorkshire has dealt with two applications in the last five years, working closely with ex-mining communities to oppose plans. The branch worked with two particularly deprived villages, Goldthorpe and Bolton-on-Deane, to oppose a scheme planned for West Moor Closes, between Barnsley and Doncaster. The scheme collapsed after a vigorous public campaign in the spring and summer of 2003. Opposition was predominantly from locals who valued the area for recreation. While the Branch had traditionally based any opposition on landscape factors, it has more recently placed emphasis on these community factors, as well as CO₂ impacts.

In November 2003, the branch objected to the extension of opencasting at Blacker Hill, south of Worsborough, Barnsley. The proposal was on green fields adjacent to a nature reserve, a much-used area of recreation for Barnsley residents. Unfortunately, Barnsley Council granted permission despite the efforts of our campaigner Andy Tickle, who included the following points in the branch's submission: "We believe the main mineral extracted will contribute to further environmental damage, both in the area and nationally, through its combustion in inefficient power plant and the resulting acid pollution and CO₂ emissions. Continuing to fuel this form of energy generation sends the wrong signals regionally about the UK's international commitments to clean air and combating climate change."

CPRE Leicestershire successfully objected to UK Coal's plan for a 'surface mine site' near Ravenstone in 2004. The objection pointed out that the application did not meet the five tests of MPG3, particularly the cumulative effects.

In **Yorkshire**, in the last year, both the York and Selby District Group and CPRE West Yorkshire have made representations against a proposed site at Fairburn Ings, located in an SSSI. In March last year, the branch organised a public meeting in partnership with the local Ramblers' Association in order to gain support for the campaign. It fought an opencast proposal at Ledstone that has been given outline planning permission despite strong objections. It is now objecting to the means of transporting the coal to the power stations by road, arguing strongly that it should be moved by river and canal to save 60 vehicle movements an hour throughout the day.

CPRE Shropshire this year submitted a detailed objection to a proposed opencast site west of Telford on the grounds of incursion into the Shropshire Hills AONB and the adverse effects on local residents from all-night pumps and generators, and noise from equipment maintenance outside working hours. The objection by our volunteer campaigner Vivian Hancock runs to over 4,000 words and is extraordinarily detailed and impressive.

Internet links

<http://coalintheuk.org>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/nov/23/fossilfuels-energy>

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