

Submission Cover Sheet

Fingerboards Mineral Sands Project Inquiry and Advisory
Committee - EES

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Request to be heard?: No - but please email me a copy of the
Timetable and any Directions

Full Name: Cedric Francis Waller

Organisation:

Affected property:

Attachment 1: EES_Response.doc

Attachment 2:

Attachment 3:

Comments: see attached submission

Kalbar's proposed Fingerboards mine and it's effect on our family farm.

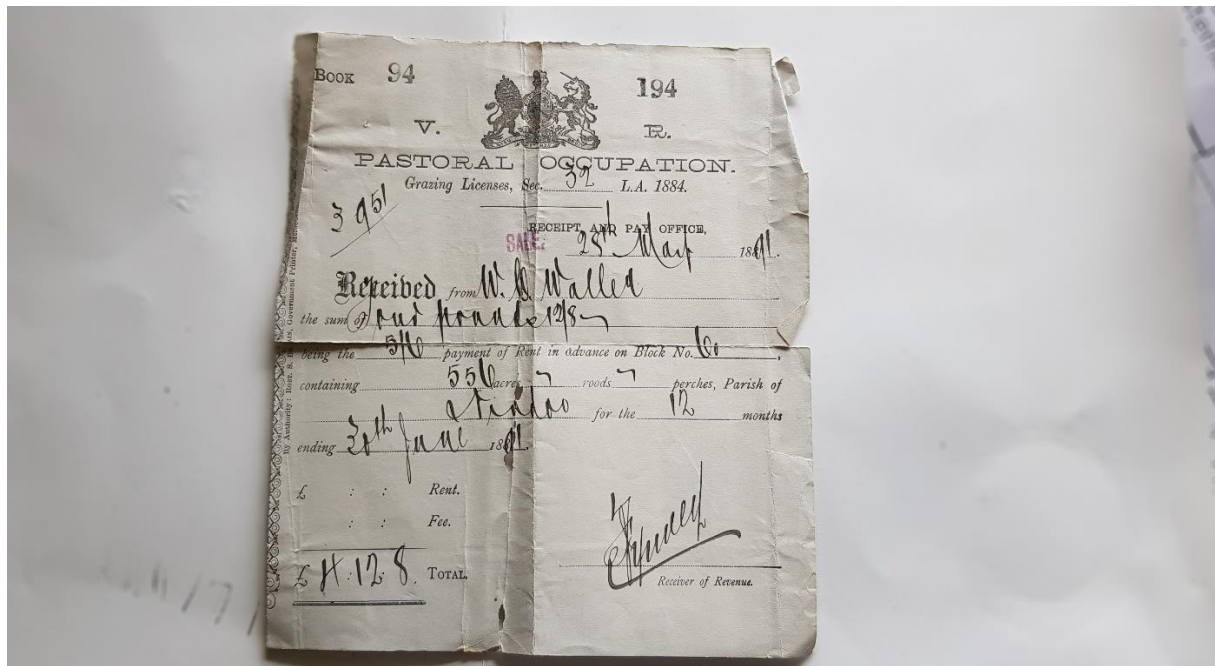
Preface.

Much will no doubt be said, and many submissions will no doubt talk about the potential side effects of the Fingerboards mine. A huge volume of technical information is now available in reference to this subject, much of which is already contained in the EES, and much of it addressed by various experts in the particular fields. Instead of rehashing the various arguments about dust, water and noise. I will try to limit this particular discussion to addressing the direct impacts on our family farming operation and provide the reader with a brief history of our deep and long term connection with the affected land and its many uses over the years.

Introduction.

Kalbar's proposed mine footprint covers one of our farms 2 blocks comprising approximately 567ac of our beef property. The mine will render our farming operation completely unworkable if it goes ahead as planned. Our current beef farming operation has been carefully tailored to the unique conditions offered by our two blocks. For example, our affected block is run as a large single paddock for "growing out" steers, while the home block "Starvale" has subtly different soil type, micro-climate and seasonality, which, given a reasonable season, allows us to finish grown steers into prime grass-fed, trade steers for the domestic market.

Written records still in our possession indicate that "Nindoo" has been in our family continuously since at least the mid to early 1880's. During that time it has been well cared for and put to pretty good use we think, it has run various enterprises, been developed and redeveloped and cropped at various times, carried agistment cattle, been used for hay production, provided timber, building materials, gravel, and meat for the family and others and been tended carefully and thoughtfully by us, with a strong regard to future generations and the sustainability of what we are doing at each step.



Shown above is a grazing licence payment from around 1891, still dealing with Bureaucracy even back then!

Since those earliest times of colonial settlement our family has suffered many ups and downs, as would be expected. Included in the tally are multiple floods, multiple bushfire's (the last one in 2014), multiple droughts (the last one abated somewhat in early 2020), multiple commodity price collapses, including the wool industry collapse of the early 90's, multiple recessions, wars, the Great Depression and virtually every other problem imaginable caused by external factors. Now we have a new threat (the fingerboard mine) that has the potential to be the final nail in the coffin for our family's farming operation in this area.

During the last 140 years our Nindoo (Block 60) has served its purpose admirably, during the Great Depression for example it provided a source of sustenance, as well as hay, timber and wattle bark (the paddock has always grown black wattle trees exceptionally well) which was sold to the hide tanneries. The wattle bark enabled our family to generate (albeit through back breaking work) enough cashflow to pay the bills and remain on the land, while supporting what little remained of the Victorian economy during those treacherous times.

A remnant of those difficult times is a unique hand tool developed and described to me by my father which I still own. It was a custom design, forged by his skills as a self-taught black smith. It could be carried on one's belt while climbing a tree, it enabled you to use one-hand to hang onto the tree while using the other to wield the tool and strip the outer bark from the tree! Necessity as they say is the mother of invention!



A hand Tool developed and forged by Hubert Cedric Waller (3 March 1896 - 27 July 1979) for stripping wattle bark at Nindoo during the depression. The hook on the left hand side was for hooking onto your belt, the blade was used to puncture the bark with a vertical slit then the curved prong was inserted and the bark peeled back to create a long sheet that could be dropped to the ground, stacked and handled. (Amazingly this was somehow accomplished without a “working at heights certificate”). Piece of cake eh?

Such is the rich living history of this part of our farm. Nindoo has proven itself to be low maintenance, dependable farming country that bounces back quickly after dry seasons and always tends to get more rainfall than the home block! Our rainfall measurements and also our subjective observation indicates that Nindoo rainfall is nearly always greater compared to our home block, the figure can be up to 10% in that immediate eastern fingerboard area. My neighbour and myself often compare rainfall figures and we both have rain gauges on our respective properties. What this means for us, is that this property will be hard to replace, it is only a 10 minute drive from the home block via a bitumen road, and we often use that road to truck cattle from one place to the other. These and other synergies mean that our beef operation only functions properly if each of the two blocks work together as a complete system. If we remove the Nindoo block or replace it with another block elsewhere, many of our synergies disappear, our workload increases and our farming system, and workflow solutions given that we don't employ external labour have the potential to become unmanageable.

Dryland farming in Australia is traditionally seen as being quite risky with uncertain profit margins, it is no big secret that a large capital outlay is required, to sustain a relatively modest lifestyle. Much of what we do is driven by intangible factors, such as the love of farming or a family's farming traditions, a sense of achievement, a certain satisfaction, a healthy lifestyle, a connection to the land and to the area, and many other factors that go into making sense of someone wanting to be involved with farming the land. In my family's case we hope to continue our farming tradition into the next generation and beyond, if the mine is approved our options to achieve this goal become rather more complex, to say the least!

We will be forced to “pick our poison” so to speak. The choice will be to swallow one or the other of two bitter pills, we can either relocate and start fresh somewhere else, or we can wait out the mine and try and cope with rebuilding from an unknown base, uncertain soil structure, changed topography, reduced vegetation profile, unknown erosion potential and most importantly an unknown potential to support healthy and productive pasture species. All this while trying to manage the everyday complexities of a normal family life with school age children. Having said that, giving up and quitting farming altogether is not on the table as an option and never will be an option!

Already the fingerboard mine has had significant negative impacts on our farming operation. For some years now we have had the threat of the mine hanging like a Damocles sword over our heads. This has meant that every management and investment decision has been tarnished and skewed by the mine, things as routine as putting out Lime, and other fertiliser applications have been downgraded or abandoned completely. Fencing has been patched up and “kept going” rather than replaced outright. Potential large capital works such as the installation of irrigation centre pivot farming has not been progressed past the desktop concept stage, due to uncertainty around the mine. This uncertainty, second guessing and the off again / on again nature of the mine has undoubtedly been a negative influence on our farms financial and overall health. We are essentially in a “wait and see” phase unable to plan ahead effectively.

Kalbar's characterisation of the Fingerboards area as marginal farming country is ill-informed and a little eyebrow raising actually. It is possible that this characterisation stems from Kalbar's relatively short exposure to the area which has coincided with a prolonged drought, or the fact that there are indeed some marginal paddocks in the vicinity, the soil types change dramatically in this area even from one end of the farm to the other, and it is my policy to farm each area according to its ability, even to the extent of leaving it untouched if it is too marginal (which some parts definitely are) Personally, I would sooner own this Nindoo block than many other similar sized properties in the area. You only have to drive around the district and see weed infested paddocks, or observe sand and dirt drifted and blown against fences and roads here and there, no such wind erosion has ever happened at Nindoo in my lifetime, weeds are manageable, and our stock are generally well nourished and contented! Microclimates do vary around the area, local wind patterns vary and I accept that farming in East Gippsland is challenging and certainly not for the faint hearted, but we are still here after many generations which I think says it all.



Shown Above is a mob of Waller cattle on the “Marginal Agricultural Country” now known as the fingerboard mine site.

Keeping an eye on “high likelihood” and “high Impact” events with the fingerboard mine.

As a lot of the work has already been done in relation to the modelling of the mine, there will be much more said by others about the various plethora of problems that could arise through mismanagement, misunderstanding the operating environment, carelessness, or just plain old bad luck. Here I will briefly mention what I consider to be the two big ticket items that I think need to be given careful consideration and the utmost scrutiny. In my opinion these 2 issues have the potential to be “high likelihood” and “High Impact” events, and therefore need to be carefully considered, and appropriately risk managed before any mine commissioning proceeds.

1. Wind and Dust.

Springtime in East Gippsland is usually accompanied by a period of intermittent strong South Westerly Winds, these unfortunate and rather annoying weather patterns will potentially cause the majority of the problems related to dust control at the mine site. It would be important from a community perspective to have minimal disturbance from dust downwind of the mine and a plan in place to mitigate undesirable negative consequences. Such mitigation measures could include but are not limited to.

- a. Dust filtration on domestic water supplies on nearby downwind residences, this could include both rainwater tank inlet filter's and inline freshwater filters.
- b. Worksite shutdowns in case of excessive dust production.
- c. In the worst cases where downwind residents have health concerns or young families are affected, it may be prudent and would be a gesture of good will if Kalbar were able to temporarily re accommodate them further from the mine site at least while dust generating works were in progress nearby. Ideally nearby families may wish to live in Bairnsdale for a few years while the mine was operating.
- d. All available onsite measures should be taken to minimise the dust emanating from the mine.

2. Extreme Rainfall -East Coast Lows.

East Gippsland has a unique feature concerning its rainfall whereby we often get much of our rainfall in one torrential downpour lasting 3-4 days! These “East Coast lows” are random occurrences of variable intensity and duration that occur mostly in the cooler months but that can occur at any time of the year! April 1990 was one such occurrence, and for those who witnessed it. It was truly an epic deluge coming as it did after months of dry weather. Much erosion damage was caused in and around watercourses as well as in the Mitchell river itself.

It is of concern to myself and many long-term residents that such a rainfall occurrence as what happened in April of 1990 may occur again at an inconvenient time of construction or dam commissioning at the mine site. It is imperative that any works planning take into account the danger posed by such a scenario and manage such tail risk accordingly.

In conclusion.

The Fingerboards mine will completely alter many aspects of life in the surrounding district, it has the potential to cause localised problems if major hazards are misidentified, mismanaged, or ignored. The utmost attention should be given to water and dust control and to what extent those two factors may impact the surrounding farming area.

There is no question that the fingerboard mine is a major mineral project and has the potential if well managed and well-resourced to be of economic and geostrategic importance. The rare earth deposit contained within the marker layer is an intriguing and valuable addition to the abundant Zircon identified in the deposit. From a practical perspective it would clearly be an impossible task to get all the minerals contained therein without causing at least some disruption to the earth's surface, and surrounding countryside.

For our family there is simply no sugar coating it. If the mine proceeds as planned, our farming history of 140 years in the area might be impossible to sustain. We will almost certainly be forced to relocate if we want to continue farming. This then opens up a pandoras box of challenges and questions that must be answered and overcome, including where do we go, how do we get set up, and what does that even look like? The challenging plunge into the unknown after seeing your farm literally turned upside down is no doubt going to take a bit of adjusting to. It will be a challenge as great as we have ever faced before and it will require a great deal of resourcefulness, energy and hard work to make the most of things, only time will tell how that plays out.



The site of the original Waller Bark hut at Nindoo from the late 1800's with a Kalbar drilling rig in the background.

This photo shows what is left of the original settlers Hut in the foreground, it would have been built from wooden slabs and likely had a roof made of stringy bark sheets or shingles. The old contraption that marks the spot is the remains of a reaper and binder which was an implement used to harvest cereal crops and tie them into bundles called sheaves that could be handled for carting and storage. The bundles would then have been thrashed to separate the grain from the straw stems. Grain was a source of energy on farm as it could be then used to feed horses, and at least a tonne per horse per year was required for draft animals. Surplus grain and straw was always readily marketable.

The fact that there is a decaying reaper and binder at Nindoo reminds the reader of the versatility of this block of land and the many uses it has been put to over the years.

I hope you found the brief summary of my family's situation with regard to Kalbar's Fingerboard mine project interesting.

Kind Regards

Frank Waller