



Coalmine rejected to protect wine region

Peter Kerr

West Australia's environmental watchdog has rejected a proposed coalmine 15 kilometres from the state's Margaret River wine region, in part to protect what it said was the area's "social fabric".

The planned mine was vehemently opposed by many residents despite the state's long mining history.

The unusual decision by the Environmental Protection Authority yesterday to include non-environmental factors in its reasoning perplexed the proposed operators of the mine, NSW-based LD Operations.

While the EPA will undertake a short public assessment of the mine, it will assess the project at a level that the "proposal is unlikely to be environmentally acceptable," effectively prejudging the issue.

"In effect, this is a 'no' to the proposal," EPA chairman Paul Vogel said in a statement yesterday. "This 'no' is based on the proponent's referral information and environmental advice presented to the EPA.

"The board considered that there is likely to be significant impacts, or risks, from the proposal on the Leederville and Sues aquifers, and on significant environmental values, including the social surrounds of the Margaret River region, which these

aquifers support and is probably Australia's most famous wine-growing region.

"Even though some of the significant impacts, or risks, may be presented as being manageable because of their low probability of occurring, the environmental consequences of some low-probability event may be so serious, widespread or irreversible that the proposal, taken as a whole, on balance, presents unacceptable risks to important environmental values, and thus makes the proposal environmentally unacceptable."

LD Operations wanted to mine coal on behalf of US billionaire Hans Mende in a paddock 15 kilometres from the town of Margaret River close to commercial vineyards.

Residents opposed the underground mine primarily because of concerns that ground water would be contaminated and the region's reputation dented.

Managing director Peter Ross said LDO was seeking clarification of the basis for the decision and considering its appeal rights. He said a longer public review would have been a more appropriate process to understand and assess the technical elements, impacts and risks of the project before any decision on environmental acceptability was made.