



Anvil Hill raises heat on Hunter eco concerns

An added drain on water is fuelling fears of farmers, says **Frances Thompson**.

IF Centennial Hunter had named its proposed open-cut mine at Anvil Hill in the often anonymous fashion of many other coalmines, events may have played out differently.

Calling it Anvil Hill sparked wide public interest and focused people's attention on the site.

The miners knew about the coal and the area was explored by Powercoal from 1999, before Centennial acquired the company in 2002. But it was mostly only Upper Hunter residents who could pinpoint the landmark rock formation, west of Muswellbrook, which is located on an old cattle property and surrounded by bush.

Now Anvil Hill has become a powerful symbol for an intensifying debate about global climate change and the environmental and

economic costs and benefits of coalmining in the Hunter.

The Anvil Hill project general manager, the jovial Joe Clayton, told a Muswellbrook business gathering last week that Anvil Hill coal could be sold cheaply to Macquarie Generation because it was subsidised by the company's export clients.

It is a clever point, given the political impact of expensive or unreliable power supplies on incumbent governments and our addiction to air-conditioners.

What the business audience, residents, tourist operators, wineries and the thoroughbred horse breeders of the Upper Hunter fear more than global warming is the Anvil Hill mine's impact on long-established communities, the threat to tourism posed by dust and noise and the extent of its economic benefits to the valley.

At the heart of these concerns is the question of how Centennial will manage a commodity that has

become as sought-after as some rare metals: water.

There is long-standing criticism in the Upper Hunter of the coal companies' apparent monopoly of water licences.

Centennial is buying licences in a tight, drought-fuelled market, where for struggling farmers, it could make more sense to sell their allocations than continue farming.

In some areas of the Hunter, no more licences are being created because there is simply not enough water.

While Mr Clayton says the company has purchased or is negotiating on 45 per cent of the houses in the area that will experience above-limit mine noise

and dust levels, he was unable to say how much water it has secured.

The mine is yet to be approved under state significant project laws, designed to accelerate development.

But the \$100 million Antiene unloader that will deliver coal to

Bayswater and Liddell power stations from Anvil Hill is already under construction.

There is believed to be only one comprehensive study of what's known as the Wybong uplands, where the mine site is located.

The vegetation study, which took seven years, says the region is one of the largest expanses of remnant vegetation in the Hunter and advocated its protection.

If the mine goes ahead as planned, the hill will be quarantined from mining and isolated by the surrounding pit.

Planning Minister Frank Sartor appointed an expert panel to review Centennial's proposal and submissions from the public because he said it required "complex and technical assessment". Hearings begin October 17, in Muswellbrook.

Frances Thompson is *The Herald's* Upper Hunter reporter.