

Devastated farmers told Avonbank mineral sands mine will go ahead on their land



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Highlight: Avonbank mineral sands' company informs farmers their land will be used for a 3,000-hectare mine, under compulsorily acquisition powers in Victoria's Mining Act.

Body

After more than 100 years, the Johns family have found their beloved farm in the footprint of a potential new mine.

If it is approved, they won't be able to live in their house for 36 years while mining at WIM Resource's new Avonbank mineral sands site is underway because of the noise, lights, vibration and "toxic dust".

Donna Johns said her family's future was on hold.

"The stress that it's caused has been fairly immense ... the lack of information too, has been hard on us," she said.

Victoria's Mining Act allows mining companies to compulsorily acquire land once granted a mining licence.

Planning Minister Sonya Kilkenny's office said the project's Environmental Effects Statement was still under review — as it has been for more than a year — meaning it was not yet determined whether the mine at Dooen would go ahead.

But multiple farmers have told the ABC they've received phone calls from WIM Resource saying it has been approved and an announcement would follow.

It means WIM Resource could have the power to compulsorily acquire the Johns family's property for the duration of the mine's life.

Fifth-generation farmer Chris Johns's eyes welled up thinking about what could be lost.

"Growing up [here] and spending ... times with my father and mum, who passed away a few years ago, this is super important to me," Mr Johns said.

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"We own this land and we've worked our guts out to keep what's here."

Application documents show WIM **Resource**, a Chinese-backed company, would mine 490 tonnes of ore, pay the state \$180 million in royalties over the mine's life, and generate nearly \$513 million in state revenue annually.

Across Victoria, hundreds of exploration licences have been taken out, while about 30 retention licences have staked claims on identified deposits in the Wimmera-Mallee.

The Avonbank project is one of 10 mineral sands projects in various planning stages across the Wimmera-Mallee and across the NSW border.

Home of the lentil industry

Andrew Weidemann is the research and development spokesperson for Grain Producers Australia, and a local farmer.

"There are only two or three really strong zones in Australia where you can grow lentils," he said.

Last harvest, Victoria shipped 8.7 million tonnes of grain — including lentils — internationally, according to the state's 2024 food and fibre export summary.

Of the \$5.6 billion generated, Mr Weidemann estimates about \$2 billion came from the Wimmera.

The Avonbank mine plans to extract 12.75 million tonnes of heavy mineral concentrate for export to China, and for use [in electric vehicles, magnets, wind turbines and ceramics](#).

Mining mineral sands also exposes monazite, a naturally occurring radioactive mineral [that can be refined into uranium](#).

Mr Weidemann is on the Avonbank mine's advisory committee and is worried about the potential contamination of produce, grain exporting facilities and an agricultural college.

"You couldn't have picked a worse spot even if you tried," he said.

Proponents say regulation is strict

James Sorahan, executive director of the Minerals Council of Australia's Victorian branch, said the environmental risk was low because government regulation was strict.

"Rehabilitation and all of these environmental and safety measures are fully integrated into a mine plan before the mine is approved," Mr Sorahan said.

WIM **Resource** plans to mine a maximum of 400 hectares at any one time before moving onto other holes, so previous pits can be rehabilitated.

The company said this technique was less invasive and only three years would be required before mined land could be sown again.

WIM **Resource** grew barley and lentil crops in 2021 and 2022 on a test pit, but local farmers weren't convinced.

Gavin Puls cropped a paddock alongside the test pit and said the company overestimated the results.

"We know what the crop looked like when they harvested it, and [how] ours was going next door, and theirs was nowhere near," he said.

"We deal with dirt everyday so we understand what can grow and what can't."

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Rehabilitation and regulation doubts

Farmers have also pointed to farmland further south at Kanagulk, where ore was mined between 2004 and 2012.

The main pit of **Iluka Resources**' Douglas mine is still being backfilled after tailings, which included radioactive material from other Victorian and interstate mines, were deposited there.

"It [was] supposed to be a moving footprint but that never happened, the whole site was mined," Kanagulk Landcare group chair Ian Ross said.

Mr Ross sat on the mine's environmental review committee.

He said large stockpiles of soil were also left on private farmland for 15 years instead of the three years promised, compacting the ground underneath and killing off any organic and microbial activity.

He said in other areas, holes being backfilled weren't compacted properly, so the ground sank and made it impossible to crop.

Iluka Resources showed the ABC the pit they began rehabilitating 10 years ago.

"A lot of that land that was here prior to us being here was not suitable for agriculture," head of rare earths Daniel McGrath said.

He said the company had rehabilitated land in Victoria for 20 years and was confident the private farmland they returned to the landholder could be cropped.

"We've handed a closure and completion notice to the landholder so I'm comfortable they're very happy with the results," Mr McGrath said.

The property owner who leased the land to Iluka told the ABC more work needed to be done but declined to comment further because they were bound by a confidentiality agreement.

The Victorian government's regulatory arm is the Earth **Resources** Regulator.

A spokesperson said **Iluka**'s change from a moving hole to a fully open mine was consistent with their Environmental Effects Statement.

Mr Ross no longer has faith in the state regulator, given his experience with the Douglas mine.

"For there to be an equitable balance, farmers need to be more empowered than they are," he said.

"You've got a well-oiled machine coming into a community with great **resources**, and each individual farmer has to try look at the Environmental Effects Statement and the science and make sure what they've been told is true."

WIM **Resource** was contacted for comment but did not respond by deadline.

Watch ABC TV's Landline at 12:30pm on Sunday or on [ABC iview](#).

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