

# Deep financial pain

## Miners get reprieve from mining lease rates hike

By JOHN ANDERSEN

SMALL miners in the Etheridge Shire have had a small win in their campaign against their local council's sharp hike on mining lease rates.

The Georgetown-based Etheridge Shire Council will stick with its plan to double the rate on small leases up to 2ha, but will lower charges on leases valued at between \$10,000 and \$25,000.

Both the Etheridge Shire Council Mayor and Deputy Mayor told the *Townsville Bulletin* that miners experiencing financial pain as a result of the increases could apply for help under Local Government hardship provisions.

Leaseholders John and Linda Barnes and Allyn Zabel said the council was squeezing small miners too hard and that some would be forced to abandon leases.

In a letter to the council Mr and Mrs Barnes from the Black Eagle Mine on the Percy River said they lived 110km from the nearest bitumen road and they maintained all dirt roads on their leases. Mr and Mrs Barnes said they could only travel to the towns of Poesyeh and Georgetown by four-wheel drive as the track was steep, sandy and rocky and rarely maintained by council.

They said council employees used the roads they had made as shortcuts in the vicinity of their Percy River lease.

"We do not complain about this

and are happy the roads are used," they said.

Following protests about the increases last month, council agreed to grant a remission on mining leases valued at between \$10,000 and \$25,000.

"We are capping those leases at \$517 per assessment," Cr Butler said.

Cr Butler said until the recent rises all mining lease charges in the shire were set at half the minimum rate.

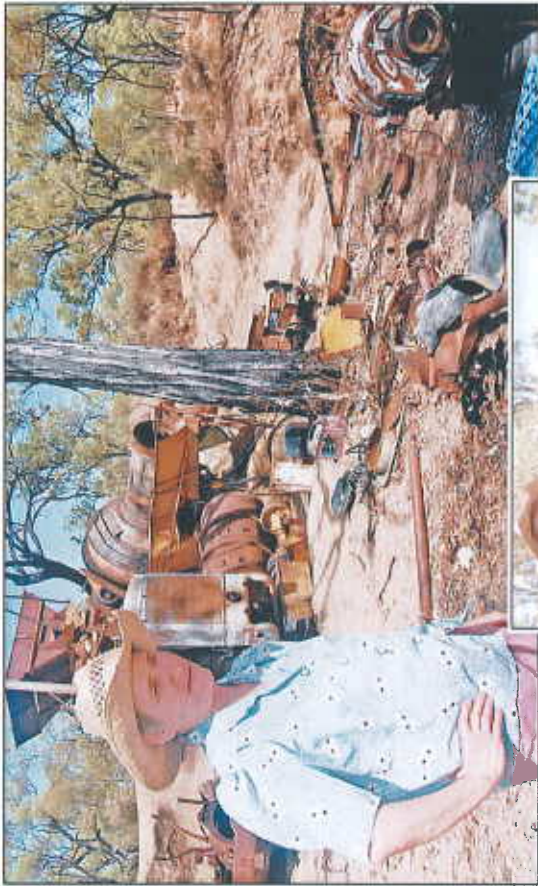
He said council had agreed to review its rating process and in the process moved to change full minimum rates across all land entitlements including mining leases small and large.

He said this meant leases under 2ha which had previously been rated at \$132 or half the minimum rate would now be charged out at \$284 a year.

"But if they take advantage of the 15 per cent discount and pay within one month that will come back to \$241 dollars," he said.

Both Cr Smith and Cr Butler said that while remissions had been granted in other rated areas involving larger leases and proportionally larger sums of money, it was decided that because of the relatively small amount of money involved with the small leases it would not reduce that amount.

"Council has decided that paying the minimum rate of \$284 does not in itself create a situation where



**ABOVE:** Linda Barnes says small miners can't afford big rate hikes

**LEFT:** Allyn Zabel says small miners are already doing it tough



hardship conditions are met," Cr Butler said

Mr Zabel said small miners could not afford any sort of rate rise and urged council to reconsider its actions. He said small miners did no damage to roads and did not rely to any great extent on council infrastructure.

Mr Zabel said council had the wherewithal to remedy the situation. He said councillors were too far removed from "two ticks and the harsh, unforgiving realities of bush life."

By EMILY MACDONALD

THE Sonoma Coal Project is full steam ahead with the site's first coal shipment set to be exported in January.

General Manager of Operations Michael McKee said preparations at Sonoma were going according to plan and the mine was shaping up to be a very successful venture.

"Thus far the progress we have made is very pleasing and there is every

indication that Sonoma will prove to be highly successful," Mr McKee said.

"We've had the remaining mining leases granted on October 1st and we've commenced preliminary operations which are progressing well."

"The coal preparation plant construction is also on target and we will begin preliminary coal washing in December."

"Everything going to plan we expect our first coal shipment from Abbott Point sometime in January."

Sonoma has also established a good working relationship with the Birri people who are the traditional owners of the land on which the mine is situated.

Mr McKee said Sonoma was keen to help the Birri people preserve their sacred sites and also give them the opportunity to secure employment on the mine.

"We are slowly salvaging the sites which have been indicated to us by the Birri people as having special significance."

"We expect to have all of the sites identified by late November and any artefacts on site protected."

"The Birri people have been very supportive of us and very positive about the venture and they have also shown a large level of interest in employment opportunities."

Mr McKee said Sonoma had plans to give back to the local community.

"We are going to donate \$10,000 to the Collinsville and Scottsville Kindergarten for a covered playground."

"We are going to be receptive to the local community and not ignore their concerns."

Sonoma is a joint venture of Cleveland Cliffs, JFE Steel, China Steel, Watarai Trading and QCoal. Sonoma said it was granted Environmental Authority in March of this year.

The mine is situated about 6km south of Collinsville and is comprised of three mining leases — Belmont West, Sonoma West and Sonoma East and it employs an estimated 170 people.

## Full steam ahead for Sonoma Coal Project



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