

# Why the Cumbria coal mine is a carbon intensive white elephant

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## Summary

West Cumbria Mining's plan for a coking coal pit near Whitehaven was initially approved by the local county council in 2020, but the decision was later withdrawn. A public inquiry was held last year to examine concerns about the mine's impact on the environment, with the Planning Inspectorate producing a report for the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Communities and Local Government. A final decision by the Secretary of State is due imminently.

The mine would provide metallurgical coal, used in traditional blast furnace steelmaking.

In summary, the mine should not be approved because:

- It does not have public support
- It would undermine the UK's climate leadership
- UK steelmakers don't need the coal
- The UK should invest in clean steel instead
- Low carbon industries offer multigenerational jobs

## It does not have public support

Opinion [polling by YouGov](#) for Green Alliance has shown that three times more adults feel negatively about opening new coal mines than positive (46 per cent compared to 14 per cent).

Two thirds (66 per cent) of adults thought it was important for the UK to move traditional industries, like steelmaking, to low carbon production. The most important reason reported was to meet climate targets (31 per cent), followed by concern about protecting jobs in those industries (22 per cent). Respondents want the government to focus on investment in low carbon industries, rather than new carbon-emitting technologies. They included 2019 Conservative voters and respondents in the North of England.

## **It would undermine the UK's climate leadership**

Direct emissions of carbon dioxide and methane from the mine would make it more challenging to meet the UK's legally enshrined net zero target, with 0.4 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e per year predicted to be added by the mine, equivalent to the output of 201,000 cars or 170,000 homes. In total, the Cumbria mine and the coal it would produce would be responsible for 8.4 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e per year, if used internationally in conventional steelmaking.

Increasing coal dependency would seriously undermine the UK's international efforts to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels, beyond which increasingly dangerous impacts of climate breakdown would be inevitable. The International Energy Agency, alongside other respected scientific bodies, has been clear that, to meet net zero by 2050, no new coal, oil and gas fields can be opened. An oversupply of coal could force down prices, encouraging other uses to appear and 'locking in' continued coal use, when investment in alternatives is needed.

## **UK steelmakers don't need the coal**

Senior steel industry bosses have highlighted that the UK steel industry does not need the coal that the Cumbria mine would produce. Of the two potential UK customers for this coking coal (Tata Steel and British Steel), neither have called for the mine or confirmed they would use any of the coal it produces, with concerns raised about the sulphur content making it harder to manage local air quality. Chris Macdonald, chief executive of the Materials Processing Institute (MPI) has made clear that the case for the mine "does not stack up with the needs of the steel industry". Steel bosses instead want the industry to be more resilient and gain a competitive edge by moving towards clean steel, which would require much smaller quantities of coal.

The EU steel industry, where the mining company says 85 per cent of the coal will be sold, is rapidly moving towards lower carbon production. Declining local demand would mean the coal from Cumbria being exported further and further afield, increasing its carbon footprint, and to less well regulated markets. Demand for it might eventually disappear altogether.

## **The UK should invest in clean steel instead**

There are now 20 alternative hydrogen steelmaking projects being trialled across Europe, but none are underway in the UK. With a metallurgical coal mine in the UK, it would be harder politically to move away from coal-based steelmaking, even though hydrogen and electric alternatives will be a better long term option. UK coal dependency will allow Chinese and European steel manufacturers to steal a march on their British counterparts. The UK should instead invest in clean steel trial projects to help the domestic sector decarbonise and remain internationally competitive.

Increasing clean steel production is a chance to futureproof the industry as well as boosting the wider UK economy. Using a combination of electrification and hydrogen direct reduction processes would [reduce](#) the industry's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 87 per cent by 2035, while increasing its productivity by 85 per cent.

## **Low carbon industries offer multi-generational jobs**

Decarbonisation has more robust and long term job creation potential than the proposed mine. Areas like West Cumbria should be at the forefront of government plans to transform the economy and level up. One [analysis](#) concluded that 9,000 low carbon jobs could be created in Cumbria in the next 15 years, with half of these in renewable electricity and just under half located in West Cumbria (Allerdale and Copeland). This analysis does not include the potential for additional multi-generational jobs in new nuclear, such as Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), which is also a prospect, given West Cumbria's existing nuclear capacity. Another [analysis](#) by the Local Government Association has found that there is potential for over 6,000 green jobs in Cumbria by 2030, in areas such as energy efficiency, solar power, offshore wind and low carbon heating. Almost 600 of these could be in Copeland, the area where this mine would be built.

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