



The **Australia Institute**  
Research that matters.

# Public opinion on mine site rehabilitation

## Briefing note

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## **ABOUT THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE**

The Australia Institute is an independent public policy think tank based in Canberra. It is funded by donations from philanthropic trusts and individuals and commissioned research. Since its launch in 1994, the Institute has carried out highly influential research on a broad range of economic, social and environmental issues.

## **OUR PHILOSOPHY**

As we begin the 21st century, new dilemmas confront our society and our planet. Unprecedented levels of consumption co-exist with extreme poverty. Through new technology we are more connected than we have ever been, yet civic engagement is declining. Environmental neglect continues despite heightened ecological awareness. A better balance is urgently needed.

The Australia Institute's directors, staff and supporters represent a broad range of views and priorities. What unites us is a belief that through a combination of research and creativity we can promote new solutions and ways of thinking.

## **OUR PURPOSE - 'RESEARCH THAT MATTERS'**

The Institute aims to foster informed debate about our culture, our economy and our environment and bring greater accountability to the democratic process. Our goal is to gather, interpret and communicate evidence in order to both diagnose the problems we face and propose new solutions to tackle them.

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## INTRODUCTION

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As the size of the clean up after the mining boom becomes apparent, mine site rehabilitation is becoming an important topic for many communities, regions and governments in Australia. A recent report on mine voids found that 6,050ha of voids will be left behind in NSW, most of which will fill with saline water, an area larger than of Sydney Harbour.<sup>1</sup>

This briefing note presents the results of polling on community attitudes towards mine rehabilitation.

## POLLING

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Between 23 May and 3 June 2016 The Australia Institute conducted a national opinion poll of 1,437 people through Research Now, with nationally representative samples by gender, age and state or territory. Results on responsibility for disused and abandoned mine sites come from an earlier 29 February to 8 March 2016 poll of 1412 people also through Research Now. Full polling questions are attached to the end of this briefing note.

## RESULTS

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77 percent of respondents said that mine sites should be fully rehabilitated, describes as:

*Rehabilitation close to previous natural or farming condition - pits refilled to near original surface level, groundwater protected and original types of vegetation replanted.*

A further 11 percent of people said partial rehabilitation was preferable, described as:

*Pits partially refilled, water pollution minimised, some revegetation of the mine surface but not to original condition.*

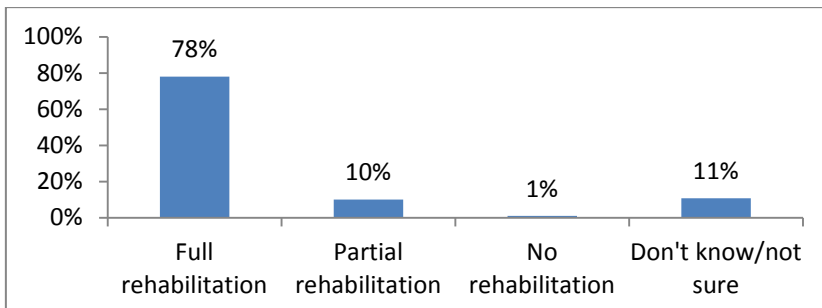
Less than 1 percent of people felt that it was acceptable for “pits [to] remain and fill with saline or acidic groundwater, dirt and rock piles remain in a fenced off area.” The final 12 percent responded “don’t know/not sure”.

These results were slightly stronger among NSW residents, the subject of the recent report:

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<sup>1</sup> Walters (2016) *The Hole Truth: The mess coal companies plan to leave in NSW*, <https://cdn.fairfaxregional.com.au/Un3zFxNgjZZYujEcmXfzcX/3d7fa0a6-8d16-4d17-9f1c-f3aa803c96dd.pdf>

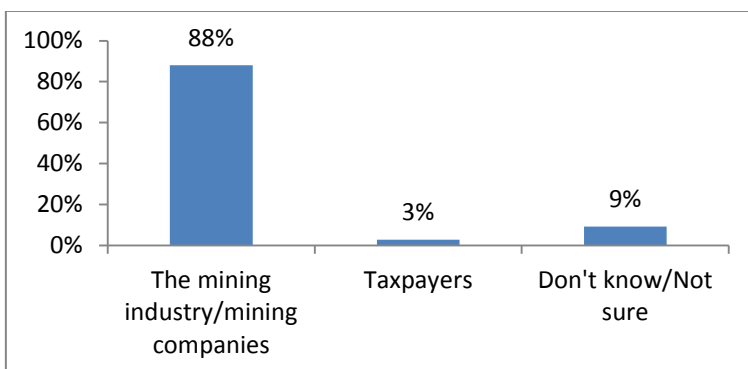
**Figure 1: NSW attitudes towards mine site rehabilitation**



Source: TAI polling

Overwhelmingly, the public sees mining companies as responsible for rehabilitating mines after they have finished operations. 88 percent of respondents answered that mining companies should pay for mine rehabilitation, with only 3 percent saying that taxpayers should foot the bill:

**Figure 2: Who should pay for rehabilitating disused or abandoned mines?**



Source: TAI polling

## CONCLUSION

The policy of allowing mines to leave large voids that fill with saline or otherwise toxic water is rejected by 99 percent of Australians. Yet this is government policy in most states and territories.

Allowing mines to leave large, toxic final voids degrades the environment and reduces costs for mining companies. This reduced cost represents a subsidy to the mining industry, one which the vast majority of Australians believes the industry should be paying.

# POLL QUESTIONS

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Mining companies are obliged by law to rehabilitate their mine sites after mining has finished. As the mining boom ends, mine site rehabilitation is becoming a significant environmental and economic issue.

**Question - Which of the following best matches your opinion of what should happen to mine sites after mining finishes?**

- **Rehabilitation close to previous natural or farming condition** - pits refilled to near original surface level, groundwater protected and original types of vegetation replanted.
- **Partial rehabilitation** - pits partially refilled, water pollution minimised, some revegetation of the mine surface but not to original condition.
- **No rehabilitation** - pits remain and fill with saline or acidic groundwater, dirt and rock piles remain in a fenced off area.
- Don't know / Not sure

**Question - There are currently a number of mines around Australia that need to be rehabilitated. Who should pay for rehabilitating disused or abandoned mines?**

- The mining industry/mining companies
- Taxpayers
- Don't know/not sure
- Total