

Hancock Prospecting Media Statement: Wittenoom

Issued Mon, 3 October 2022

Background: What was Hancock's involvement at Wittenoom?

Mr L.G. Hancock and partner Mr E.A. Wright together, at times with a friend, had operational control only for a few years up to 1943, importantly this was only for a very small operation further up the Wittenoom Gorge, away from the town and visiting people. This was in an area more difficult for people to access. Asbestos at the time being an essential item needed for the war years. In addition to being used in other areas for protection, e.g. brake linings, and to reduce fire risk in buildings and submarines.

- 1. It is estimated that total mining activities in the Wittenoom gorge by Hancock and Wright controlled entities resulted in approximately 50 tonnes for export during this period. Lang Hancock together with a few others did the very hard task of mining the asbestos.*
- 2. In contrast, Wittenoom was operated by Colonial Sugar Refining Company Ltd (CSR) including a large preparation plant until around late 1966. Asbestos fibre extracted by other mining companies in Wittenoom, predominantly CSR, between pre-1943 and late 1966 is estimated at 161,000 tonnes.*
- 3. Therefore, Hancock and Wright's activities during the period asbestos mining was undertaken equates to approximately 0.04% of total output, or less. With Hancock's contribution less than half of that i.e. less than 0.02%.*

The background to the ownership of operations during this period is:

- 1. It is a matter of public record that Mr L.G. Hancock reported crocidolite in the Wittenoom Gorges in 1936. By 1938, world demand for long asbestos fibre had created a small boom in the Hamersley region with many prospectors engaged in the production of hand cobbled crocidolite fibre.*
- 2. By 1943 some milled crocidolite fibre was being produced by West Australian Blue Asbestos Fibres Ltd., operated by Mr Izzy Walters and Mr Walter Leonard, while separately, a partnership between Mr L.G. Hancock, Mr E.A. Wright and Mr E.J. Warren also operated a very, very tiny mine. These operations were very basic, with mining mainly done by individual prospectors who carted their rocks out on the backs of donkeys.*
- 3. A majority stake and operational control in Hancock and Wright's mining interests in Wittenoom were acquired in 1943 by CSR through its subsidiary Australian Blue Asbestos Ltd. (ABA). Hancock and Wright's remaining minority interests were later acquired by CSR. They did not have the capital to commit to CSR's expanded operations including its large preparation plant.*
- 4. CSR initiated large scale operations with new mines and preparation facilities considerably closer to the town of Wittenoom, which significantly increased production and created the tailings dumps that remain today.*

5. *The WA Department of Mines report for the year 1943 noted that CSR, upon acquiring control and majority of Hancock and Wright's very small operations, began construction of a mill designed to crush 1,000 tonnes of rock per month. The estimated total fibre production upon completion was 350 tonnes per month. Hancock and Wright, then very small businessmen, had no equity in CSR's major investment and larger operations.*
 6. *It is also on public record that through the 1950's and into the mid 1960's crocidolite tailings from the tailings dump at CSR's Wittenoom mine were spread throughout Wittenoom as a cheap gravel substitute. CSR used tailings around its own buildings in Wittenoom. Residents also spread tailings around homes and businesses as did the Shire of Ashburton, the Public Works Department and the Main Roads Department in the course of public works. Hancock did not do this and had no mining operations in the Wittenoom area during these decades, or since.*
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Media Statement

Hancock disagrees with media commentary suggesting it is proposing to undertake mining at or around Wittenoom against the wishes of the traditional owners of those lands, the Banjima People.

Hancock strongly refutes any suggestion it is acting contrary to the interests of the Banjima People in relation to any projects. Hancock values its ongoing positive engagement with the group, a relationship which has stretched over more than one hundred years. This important, somewhat unique, relationship includes employment and business opportunities for local people related to agriculture and future mining on Banjima country, as well as the preservation of culture. This was demonstrated by Hancock's Executive Chair, who, at the request of a senior Elder who previously lived at Mulga Downs, gave a part of Mulga Downs Station to the Banjima People in the 1990's to further cultural understanding.

Hancock, although having a station in the area over multi-generations where many Banjima People have lived and worked over the decades, and having held tenements over that period, currently does not have any mining operations on Banjima country. It has long been known that ultimately mining would be planned at Mulga Downs.

Contrary to articles published by the ABC in recent months, Hancock has no intention to re-open Wittenoom. Hancock is supportive of any government initiative to remediate the Wittenoom area. Hancock has been actively engaged with Banjima's efforts to advance industry consultation in this regard.

In addition, Hancock encourages people not to smoke, given the sticky lining this causes to lungs, putting at risk those who may visit asbestos areas, or may have asbestos in their homes or fences.

As has been reported, Hancock does hold exploration tenure in the Drillers Ridge area, which sits within the Wittenoom Asbestos Management Area (WAMA). This area is one of four temporary reserves that form part of the Iron Ore (Wittenoom) Agreement Act 1972. Three of the temporary reserves covered by the State Agreement were pegged and granted prior to the area being gazetted as a national park. In line with government policy prohibiting mineral exploration and production in national parks, no work has been done or is planned for these three temporary reserves. In fact, Hancock has opened dialogue with BNTAC and the WA Government to relinquish the three Temporary Reserves located in the national park in due course, with the intent to ensure the necessary protections are in place for them to be integrated back into Karijini and not available for development by other miners. There are several holders of tenements in the national park, and Hancock is taking a leadership role in relinquishing its tenements, provided they are not later allocated to others who hold tenements.

In relation to the Drillers Ridge tenure, which is outside of the national park, Hancock must submit work plans and undertake exploration activities in accordance with those plans as required by the WA Mining Act. Safety management plans (including for asbestos) are required to be lodged periodically with the work plans in order to demonstrate the company's proposed processes for safely managing risks associated with any asbestos. Such safety processes are already in operation in other Pilbara areas where minerals are mined and asbestos occurs. With the consent of the Banjima People, air and soil monitoring programs have been undertaken. Air monitoring has been in place since 2012 in relation to Drillers Ridge. Independent expert advice provided to Hancock shows any potential risks can be mitigated with appropriate proven precautions. Hancock has offered to fund BNTAC's own independent expert to advise on risks and safe handling, but to date BNTAC has not progressed this offer.

Hancock also wishes to clarify a popular misconception in relation to Wittenoom. It did not mine the asbestos that has created the large tailings dump near CSR's old mine and process plant. Further, unrehabilitated tailings which are contributing to the contamination of the landscape in and around Wittenoom are in no way related to prior activities by Hancock but are the result of historical actions by other organisations.

Before undertaking any works on any exploration tenement, mining companies must receive agreement for those works from the relevant traditional owners. The Banjima People have not supported any work outside of monitoring activities on the Drillers Ridge tenements and Hancock has respected those wishes. Hancock has, however, otherwise satisfied its tenure obligations and its Drillers Ridge tenements are in good standing.

Hancock is currently undertaking a pre-feasibility study for the Mulga Downs iron ore project which sits on Banjima country, well outside the national park. The proposed Mulga Downs mining area is not within the WAMA and Hancock and BNTAC have been engaged in constructive discussions regarding the project. The Mulga Downs tenements do not form part of the Iron Ore (Wittenoom) Agreement Act 1972. The Mulga Downs tenements are situated on the Mulga Downs Station, held by Hancock and generations of the Hancock family, where both Banjima and Hancock family members have worked over generations. Negotiations with BNTAC for the development of Mulga Downs is not contingent on, or connected to, Drillers Ridge.

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