

Major players back idea for local mining training centre

THE dream of a new TAFE Mining Skills Training Centre in Gunnedah could become a reality by as early as 2015, with the major players – from mining companies to education institutions and two tiers of government – putting their support behind the idea.

While it's still just an idea in the formative stages, it is hoped the centre will eventually provide education facilities in mining-related disciplines for up to 200 trainees a year and draw the bulk of its students from communities across the Gunnedah Basin.

The ambitious project is the brain-child of the Gunnedah Basin Coal Producers' Group – a co-operative of mining executives from each of the large mining interests in the region, who meet monthly in Gunnedah to co-ordinate their approach to addressing community and industry issues within the region. The group has been meeting with New England TAFE executives to develop the idea and has begun putting together an official proposal, with input from UNE vice-chancellor Richard Torbay and Tamworth MP Kevin Anderson at a meeting late last month. Together, they hope to be able to put a definite proposal to the Department of Education and Training's TAFE Capital Works program this month.

TAFE Gunnedah campus trades and primary industries faculty director John Michael says the proposed training centre and associated new facilities would involve a significant expansion of the Gunnedah facilities and training capabilities.

"While it is early days yet, this is a very exciting prospect for the TAFE and for the Gunnedah community," Mr Michael said.

"The centre would require significant capital works and involve a huge expansion in the number of students we can cater for and in the courses we offer. There is the prospect of a partnership with the University of New England, to develop further tertiary



TRADE DEVELOPMENT: From left, Gunnedah Basin Coal Producers' Group members Stephen David of BHP Billiton Caroon Coal, Mark Howes of Shenhua Watermark, Ken McLaren of Boggabri Coal, Craig Simmons of Maules Creek, Tim Muldoon of Whitehaven Coal, Steve Harper of Coalworks, TAFE business development manager Darren Keegan, Tania McShane from BHP Billiton Caroon Coal, Melanie Layton of Shenhua Watermark, TAFE New England Institute's John Michael, Northern Tablelands MP Richard Torbay, Tamworth MP Kevin Anderson and Geoff Kidd from Coalworks.

training and study opportunities."

It is proposed the new facility would be jointly funded by contributions from the mining companies themselves and the Department of Education.

Gunnedah Basin Coal Producers' Group chairman and Coalworks chief operating officer Geoff Kidd said a TAFE Mining Skills Training Centre would go a long way to reducing skills shortages, both for the mining companies and local industry.

"People from communities across the region would be trained in Gunnedah, to meet the growing demand for mining workers that we all expect over the coming decades," Mr Kidd said.

"A TAFE Mining Skills Training Centre in Gunnedah would ensure the huge career opportunities associated with the region's mineral resources are offered to local workers first.

"Training locals to fill local jobs

would ensure that more of the vast benefits of the mining industry stay within the region."

He said the centre would also help address the draw-down of skilled workers from local industries and would instead provide a far larger pool of skilled workers to fill the positions.

It is envisaged the mining companies and the TAFE would partner with local businesses and industries where possible, to provide workplace placements for many of the trainees.

"The same sort of thing is already happening on a far smaller scale at individual businesses across the region, where trainees spend their first few years working at the business, subsidised by the mine, before they complete their training with the sponsoring company," Mr Kidd said.

"While the mines get the benefit of more local trained workers, the business gets a valuable extra set of hands, for the price of time spent training on

the job." Training offered would include everything from diesel fitters and electricians to hydraulic engineers and mine management, engineering and environmental courses.

Northern Tablelands MP Mr Torbay said the university was excited about working with the TAFE on the project.

"For the university this would offer a wonderful facility, more central to the Gunnedah Basin, where we could offer further tertiary training and courses to the region," he said.

"I would expect a number of people from Armidale and across the Northern Tablelands will take up the opportunities here as well."

Mr Anderson said having the centre located in Gunnedah made all kinds of sense.

"Gunnedah is central to the expanding mining industry and to communities across the region," he said.

– *The Namoi Valley Independent*