

Acid lakes form at Jacobs Well

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MASSIVE acidic lakes are being created near the sleepy village of Jacobs Well, with some fearing they could threaten the town's fishing industry.

The lakes are being formed by sand extraction, which has dredged to depths of more than 6m and left behind acidic ground water.

Longtime former Jacobs Well Progress Association president and Jacobs Well Environmental Education Centre chairman Don Waters said farmers were looking to sell up and make millions.

"We are living on a timebomb that's waiting to go off. In the past six to nine months the acid sulphate issue has worsened," said Mr Waters yesterday.

"We've got this lunar landscape and we can't even build houses near or around the lakes because of the run-off sediment."

There are fears the lakes could pose a threat to public safety and nearby farms in the future, despite the State Government originally promising the site would eventually be transformed into an international rowing course.

A local resident for 26 years, Mr Waters said he feared for the long-term effects on the ecosystem.

"We need to come up with a solution for the long-term environmental future of Jacobs Well even if that means constructing a deep canal through the guts of the farmland," he said.

"The developers are circling and the farmers want to sell because they're sitting on goldmines. There is sand from the bay to the Logan River, and imagine if that was all ripped up."

The lakes are grouped together about 500m from the main township.

Another extraction operation is set to begin, leaving behind another 'lake'.

There are homes and farms located across the street from the site, which is easily accessible to the public.

Suggestions recently made behind the scenes to address what could be done to preserve the land included an idea to transform it into a new Cable Ski World.

Being landlocked, water in the lakes cannot reach estuary systems and is deemed too acidic to be used as recycled water on adjacent sugar cane properties.

The new sand site is located on a 752,070sqm parcel of land and will be positioned adjacent to lakes near the Rocky Point Sugar Mill.

Within 10 to 15 years the site will become another lake. The applicants also want to build a petroleum storage facility on-site.

The official council report into the latest application says the site has been 'significantly disturbed through past agricultural activities'.

Prepared by Planit Consulting on behalf of the council, it states: "Concern was raised that the area is being degraded by creation of lakes that cannot be rehabilitated. Issues were also raised regarding potential adverse environmental impacts from the water bodies and the extractive operations.

"Concern was raised that the resultant lake system would be a safety concern for members of the public."

The yearly extraction rate is capped at 300,000 tonnes and the quarry pit cannot extend below a depth of 6m. Pyritic sediments must be covered by at least 4m of water once the site transforms into an artificial lake.

Swimming and powered watercraft use will not be allowed when the site is shut down, with pH levels required to remain between 6 and 8.5 when the operation is decommissioned.

An EPA spokesman said its officers would keep an eye on the sand operation and lake water quality.

"The EPA's permit sets out water quality guidelines for the life of the sand extraction activity," he said. "The EPA will enforce compliance of these guidelines as long as the extraction activity continues."

The guidelines are designed to ensure that the sand extraction activity does not trigger environmental problems.

"It also requires the operator to ensure that any water remaining after the sand extraction activity has ceased meets the relevant criteria for subsequent uses, and does not have the potential to cause environmental harm," said the spokesman.

Alfie Monte, who has lived across from the lakes for 30 years, said the character of the town had been jeopardised by the sandmining.

"It's a problem," he said. "You can't build anything there now. That really was good farming land and they've ruined it. They shouldn't be allowed, not so close to the sea and to the water -- it's awful."

Professionals Real Estate Jacobs Well agent Lorna Kelly said about 8-12 months ago there were whispers of sand being located underneath cane farms.

"Someone ended up putting it on the internet and the farmers all went to see if their land had sand underneath it," said Ms Kelly. "Obviously the ones who had sand under it were very happy because their land would be worth more and the others were very disappointed.

"I did hear there were pockets of sand at Rocky Point near the mill. I also heard one of the prawn farms just sold."

Cr Peter Young is worried the Environmental Protection Agency had approved the 'mining' under different circumstances.

"I have some serious questions about the long-term use of the area and the strategic use of it down the track," said Cr Young.

"It can't be turned into another Cable Ski World because it doesn't have close access to the water or estuary system to clean it out and make it useable."

Former deputy mayor David Power previously went on record as saying 'no new permits would be issued for extractive industry' once the current mining had finished.

His Division 2 replacement, Cr Donna Gates, does not seem to share the same strong view but has queried the lengthy six-day-a-week operational hours.

A senior council officer said he did not quite know how the EPA had approved the sand mining permits in the first place and so close to a residential area and a diverse ecosystem, but the council was bound by 20-year-old mandates.

There are a number of small and medium-sized sand operations in the Jacobs Well, Norwell and Steiglitz areas, which were grouped together by the State Government in the 1980s.

At next week's council meeting, councillors are expected to approve the application made by developers Select Venue Systems, consisting of Joseph and Andrew Axiak, Jean Xuereb, Brett Micklewright and Donna Milford.

The Bulletin could not get in contact with the Sydney-based Axiaks which operates the company Select Venue Systems.

However, Mr Micklewright, a Jacobs Well resident and co-owner of the land to be mined, said he was fed up with all of the red tape surrounding the project.

"I don't even want to hear the word 'sandmining'. The whole process has been a bunfight and I've had very little to do with it. There are several owners of the site," he said.

Council officers and councillors freely admit they are bound by EPA clearances, which allow for the land to be mined.

The applicants will employ a sand dredge, front-end loaders, excavators, water trucks, bulldozers, scrappers, graders and a dump truck which will operate Monday to Friday from 6am to 6pm and 7am to 1pm on Saturdays.

Environmental issues associated with the operations include operation of heavy vehicles including associated noise, dust and road congestion.

Most of the areas subject to extraction were formerly used for growing sugar cane.

The Jacobs Well estuarine sand is similar to the sand in Moreton Bay. However extraction of the sand results in the conversion of farmland to wetlands.

The sand mining operators are required under the Environmental Protection Act 1994 to put up a \$1 million financial surety to the Gold Coast City Council which will be reviewed on a five-yearly basis.

The treatment of 93,500sqm of acid sulphate soil sludge costs \$420,000, dredging sludge from bottom of lake costs \$467,500 and treating a site to a satisfactory aesthetic and environmental value costs \$112,000.