

The Cononish goldmine cover-up – we don't need more National Park Authorities like this

Description



In mid-February a small part of tailings stack 2 had been covered in matting. An FOI response from SEPA revealed that the LLTNPA had in December required the whole of the stack to be covered by 13th February to stop sediment entering the river system. (My apologies for lack of formatting etc in this post. It's been written on my phone from the Alps).

Once again there is no proper report to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) Board Meeting on Monday 11th March about the risks associated with the SGZ Cononish goldmine. But there is an “update” at the very end of the Chief Executive’s Report ([see here](#)).

The report is highly misleading, as this post will explain, and judged against other evidence from the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) suggests that the Chief Executive, Gordon Watson, is deliberately keeping his board members and the public in the dark.

1) **Claim:** *“Planning and Access Committee have received regular updates on this matter”.*

Comment: the Cononish goldmine has only once been on the agenda of the Planning and Access Committee in the last 15 months and that was at the end of October. The Planning Committee met in February but despite the clear problems at the Cononish mine, there was no report.

But perhaps Mr Watson or his Director of “Place”, Stuart Mearns, have been providing regular updates to planning committee MEMBERS in secret since the autumn? I established through an information request (FOI) that there were no communications sent to board members about the unfolding crisis at the mine before the end of the summer. I have therefore submitted another FOI for all updates given

the the planning committee since their October meeting.

If Committee members have received updates adding information to that in the CEO 's report, why isn't that being shared with the rest of the board? And if not, will any Planning Committee member dare to challenge the CEO?

2) **Claim:** *"The Mine Operating Company, SGZ Cononish Ltd, has not entered into administration. Members will recall this had been announced by the company as likely in public statements during Autumn 2023. Scotgold Resources Limited – the Australian based parent company – did enter into administration in November and this was widely reported in the media".*

Comment: The relevance of this is unclear, as I have explained on Parkswatch, because as a fully owned asset of Scotgold the future of the mine will be decided by the administrator. Mr Watson failed to mention to his board the creditors meetings which have taken place, a sign Scotgold was going into liquidation, and it now has (29th February). As part of that the administrator can either sell SGZ Cononish or dispose of all that company's remaining assets. The important point here is that both SGZ and Scotgold were obviously in financial difficulties a year ago and the LLTNPA did nothing

3) **Claim:** *"As shared at the December Board meeting, SGZ Cononish Ltd ceased production and put the mine site in a care and maintenance regime with a small number of staff employed to undertake these duties in September 2023. This remains the status of the operations at the mine site at this time."*

Comment: this is NOT true. An FOI response from SEPA about unlawful sediment discharges at the mine (there were three in December) includes an email dated 19th December stating responsibility for daily activity, IE care and maintenance, at the mine had changed. Unfortunately the name of the body responsible has been redacted by SEPA but the email was from "infracapgp". This could be from Infra Capital Greenfield Partners. Whether they are simply managing the mine site or have done a deal with the administrators to buy SGZ Cononish or it's tangible assets is unclear. The important point however is LLTNPA staff replied to this email on 20th and asked meet the new people responsible for the mine. What Mr Watson has told his board therefore is completely wrong. I have submitted another FOI to the LLTNPA for the information they hold about who is currently responsible for care and maintenance at the mine and from what date infracapgp became involved. If, as part of the liquidation of Scotgold, SGZ Cononish is being sold off to another mine operator that surely should have been mentioned in the report.

4) **Claim:** *"Concerns were raised by the Park Authority with the Company in December following a site visit. This was in respect of the management of tailings and the need to maintain the settlement ponds considering the typically wetter weather during the winter period. Remedial works were subsequently required by the National Park Authority and these are almost complete. "*

Comment. I had been warning about the risks presented by the exposed tailings stacks since staff were laid off at the end of September and had the Convener, Dr Heather Reid, responded as I requested, suitable action could have been taken much sooner. But she is as yet to respond to a single one of my emails.

What Mr Watson's report does not mention is the LLTNPA'S deadline for covering up the exposed tailings was 13th February – I have SEPA to thank for that information.

Instead of making the board aware of this, which would suggest care and maintenance arrangements are not nearly as robust as Mr Watson implies, once again board members are being kept in the dark. If of course these care and maintenance arrangements have been taken over by a potential new operator, their failure to comply with timescales would say something about their fitness to take over operation of the mine.

5) **Claim:** *"Members are reminded that the National Park Authority's interests are primarily in respect of compliance with the planning requirements set out in the conditions attached to the permission approved by the Board in February 2018"*

Comment. This is a good example of how Gordon Watson controls his board by telling them what they can and cannot say. It is not true. The LLTNPA approved the Cononish goldmine due to political pressure and Gordon Watson more than any other member of staff was key to that, first as Director of Planning and then as Chief Executive. A goldmine should have never happened in a National Park worthy of the name and the last thing Mr Watson wants is any sort of inquiry into how what was so clearly an unsustainable and environmentally damaging development was ever allowed.

I have emailed Dr Reid asking her to bring all the matters raised in this post to the Board's attention when they meet on 11th. I also intend to write to Lorna Slater, the Minister responsible for National Parks, to consider what has and still is going wrong at Cononish and what this says about the need to reform Scotland's existing National Parks before – or at the same time as – creating a new one.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. conservation
2. Governance
3. LLTNPA
4. planning
5. Scottish Government
6. SEPA

Date Created

March 7, 2024

Author

nickkempe