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POSITION STATEMENT ON THE NAMOSI MINE, VITI LEVU, FIJI

Background

As a result of over 25 years of many stakeholders’ commitment, active work, research, surveys and consultation with the landowning communities of the Sovi Basin Conservation Area, 99% of its landowners signed a consent to lease their land to the National Trust of Fiji for the purpose of conservation.

After a period of five years with a temporary lease, the National Trust of Fiji was formally offered a conservation lease to the Sovi Basin by the iTaukei Land Trust Board on 26th May 2011 and this lease was subsequently paid for on 10th July 2011. In August 2011, following several letters to the Office of the Prime Minister by the Namosi Joint Venture, the Prime Minister halted the processing of the lease document for the Sovi Basin Conservation Area.

Namosi Joint Venture has unilaterally attempted to redefine the boundary of the Sovi Basin Conservation Area confining it to the upper reaches of the Sovi River and excluding the Wainavadu Creek catchment which they wish to convert to a tailings dam for mine waste even before its Environmental Impact Assessment with the appropriate consultations has been submitted. This action has brought it into conflict not only with landowners and conservation stakeholders in Fiji but also the international conservation community.

In these circumstances, NatureFiji-MareqetiViti, as Fiji’s leading domestic conservation organisation, feels it is necessary to put forward its Position Statement on mining at Namosi.

This Position Statement contains a set of context statements that underpin the position setting it in the context of biodiversity conservation, the landowning communities and Fiji’s current economic status.

Context Statements

A. Fiji’s economy is in decline and NatureFiji-MareqetiViti recognizes that major economic investment and development is required if Fiji’s citizens are to have a future commensurate with Fiji’s intrinsic potential. However, it is fundamental that such investment and economic development is based on sustainability principles to which Fiji has made commitments through a suite of international conventions and agreements, and national policy commitments. These include the Convention on Biological Diversity, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Millennium Development Goals, the Noumea Convention, the World Heritage Convention, the Fiji National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan and the Environmental Management Act 2005.

B. Over 99.9% of Fiji’s endemic biodiversity is found in Fiji’s forests. The Sovi Basin Conservation Area is recognized as the most important forest conservation areas in Fiji which is supported by its inclusion on the World Heritage Tentative List submitted to UNESCO by the Government of Fiji. The Wainavadu catchment is an integral component of the Sovi Basin Conservation Area and has been defined and universally recognized as such since at least 1988.

C. 99% of the landowners of the Sovi Basin including the Wainavadu catchment have given their consent to leasing the area for conservation.

D. NatureFiji-MareqetiViti is of the opinion that advocates of mining, including governments, commonly overestimate the national and regional economic benefits and underestimate the environmental and social costs and impacts of mining. In this respect, the Government and people of Fiji must recognize that the impacts of such large scale mining that is being proposed for Namosi - no matter how well mitigated - are permanent and intergenerational. This is inevitable with large open cut mining operations and disposal of mine tailings into natural ecosystems. The impacts of open cut mining and tailing disposal will remain an environmental and social management issue for decades beyond the economic life of the mine. The loss of ecosystem services from impacted areas are likely to be permanent and very costly. The Namosi Joint Venture will be long gone but the people of Fiji will continue to live with the environmental
and social consequences of the operations, and the government will have the responsibility of ensuring that long term impacts are managed to acceptable standards. There are numerous examples of the social and environmental impacts of large scale mining operations in the Pacific region, particularly in Papua-New Guinea and New Caledonia.

E. Fiji’s environmental management administration is completely ill-equipped in respect of technical resources to regulate to acceptable standards a mine the size of Namosi, as evidenced by the lack of effective environmental management at the small scale Nawailevu bauxite mine, Vanua Levu.

F. If the Government and landowners decide that it is in the best interest of the nation for mining to take place at Namosi and the Wainavadu catchment is shown incontrovertibly to be an essential component of it, then NatureFiji-MareqetiViti urges that:

a. Government upgrades its regulatory administration to international best standard and, in doing so, ensures that decision making for the proposed mine is based on thorough environmental and socio-economic assessments, planning and management to international standards. As part of this process the Government should establish an international environmental and social panel of experts to advise it through assessment, planning and management phases and ongoing monitoring reviews to ensure compliance to international standards. Establishment of the panel of experts could also include an advisory role for the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.

b. Government and the Namosi Joint Venture ensure that landowners are fully aware of the social costs and benefits, including environmental impacts, of mine development and operation. This awareness raising should include inspection of similar operations in Papua New Guinea, and should include Government decision makers.

c. Government must ensure that the Namosi Joint Venture implements the international Biodiversity Offset Standard which Newcrest Mining was instrumental in developing, as a component of the Environmental Impact Assessment and not retrospectively when conditionality will have been lost. Such an offset, or compensation in lieu, must provide long term environmental and social benefits for the people of Fiji by protecting the ecological foundations of sustainable development as committed in Fiji’s Environmental Management Act, National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan and other policy instruments. Any offset, or compensation in lieu, must be additional to other economic benefits that may accrue from the mining operation if it proceeds (such as lease, royalty revenues and taxes), and must not replace other impact management and amelioration requirements and standards placed on the Namosi Joint Venture.

The Trustees,
Fiji Nature Conservation Trust,
Suva,

19 June 2012.

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Map of the Sovi Basin Conservation Area (combined light and green coloured area) as surveyed and originally leased to the National Trust for Fiji with the area excised (light green) for the Namosi Joint Venture waste rock dump and tailings dam.