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Worries over mine silica dust

A MASSIVE sand and silica mine expansion planned in the Kurrimine Beach area is raising concerns about possible health risks to the local community.

Contributed By David Gardiner



A large area of Kurrimine Beach area will be mined for silica ‘flour’, prompting residents’ concerns about potential silica dust Picture: Google Earth.

Mining company Silica Resources Australia (SRA) announced earlier this year that it is going ahead with the mammoth project, which will see it digging up around 50 million tonnes of sand over the project’s 50-year, two-stage projected lifespan.

SRA says it will ramp up annual production to more than 360,000 tonnes over the next 12 months – and more than 750,000 tonnes within the next five years, to be exported from the Port of Mourilyan, a 27-kilometre truck journey away.

The company will process the mined sand on site using a 'silica flour' plant, expected to be built and operational by about September next year.

The silica will then be shipped to countries like Canada, the US and Japan, where it will be used to make products including solar panels, smart phones, electric vehicles, semiconductors and high-tech glass products.

Community members in the area have set up a group to monitor the progress of the mining project, the Silica Mine Residents Forum.

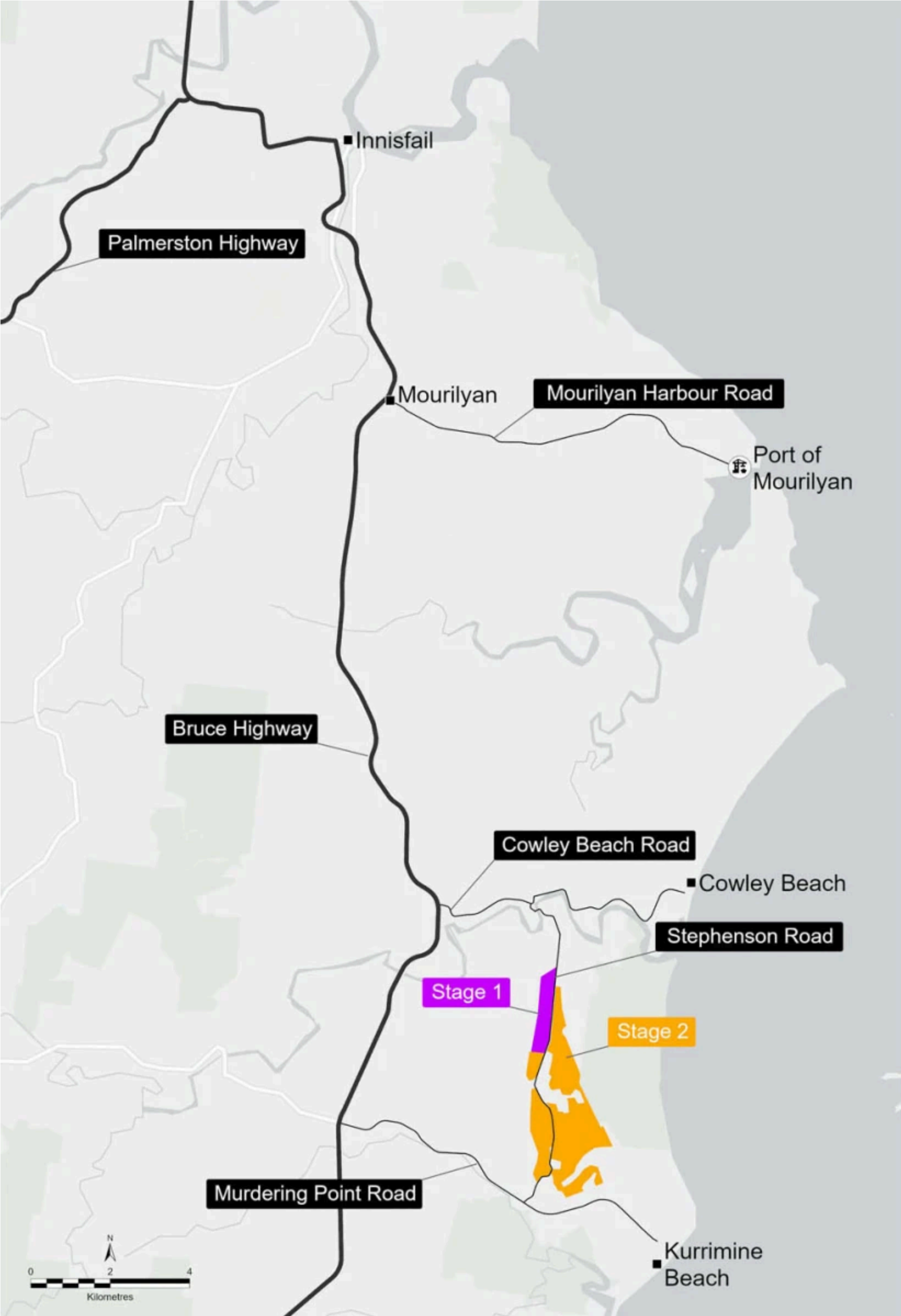
Founder Sandy Bartlett told The Observer there were several concerns given the large scope of the mining, particularly potential health issues from silica dust, which has affected many communities close to mines around Australia.

"There are people who've worked in silica mines before who've had silicosis. It's a very well-known fact, it happens and people die. And you might not even know about it for the first 10 years," Ms Bartlett said.

SRA says it is fully aware of the residents' concerns and already has in place processes to monitor, avoid or mitigate the risk of dust and finer particles.

"SRA initiated dust monitoring for the project in 2024 and this will be ongoing over the life of the project," the company's CEO-managing director Rob Tindall said in a statement to The Observer.

SRA also told residents at a Kurrimine Beach Progress Association meeting in July this year that "the risk posed by silicosis is avoided as SRA will cut all silica on site at 75 microns and runs a wet process to ensure fine silica particles and dust are not included in the mining process. Any smaller size fraction is passed wet into geotube bags."



A map showing the large area of the silica mine’s expansion in orange. Picture: Supplied.

But another forum member, Bronwyn Simpson, says she personally has concerns about areas out in the open sand mine – especially over periods during the drier months of the year, when the sand does not stay wet.

“Each time that that scoop goes across the sand, it’s going to be grinding down the sand into that really small particle dust, and then it’s being picked up and dumped down. If that is not wet, then that is going to create the dust,” she said.

The forum members are also calling for SRA to make the results of air quality monitoring, including any incidence of silica dust in the atmosphere around the mine, available to the public.

As regulations stand currently, this data only has to be reported to the state government – which has already publicly supported the massive project to the tune of \$30 million through the state-owned Queensland Investment Corporation.

“If SRA really want transparency and want to be comfortable within, then they should be feeling that they can report this,” Ms Simpson said.

“There are other mines apparently around the country that do that and I think that would put a lot of the community at ease,” she added.

Mr Tindall said: “SRA will comply with all legislation and regulations, which includes all statutory air quality reporting to the Queensland Government and regulators.

“Queensland and Australia adhere to the highest global standards in environmental and health laws,” he said.

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