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Dear Minister Kilkenny,

**Re: Fingerboards Project (Gippsland Critical Minerals Pty Ltd) — Request for a new Environmental Effects Statement (EES)**

Friends of Gippsland Lakes (FoGL) writes to request that the rescoped Fingerboards Project be determined to require a new Environmental Effects Statement (EES) under the *Environment Effects Act 1978* and the Ministerial Guidelines.

FoGL is a community-based organisation focused on protecting and restoring the ecological health, public values, and long-term resilience of the Gippsland Lakes system. We are particularly concerned about potential downstream impacts from this proposal, via catchments, waterways and groundwater systems, on the Gippsland Lakes environment, including water quality, ecosystem condition, and associated social and economic values.

**The previous Minister’s findings remain highly relevant**

This request is grounded in the clear findings of the previous Minister’s Assessment, which concluded: “the project will result in unacceptable environmental effects and ... should not proceed,” and further that “Further examination of uncertainties would not change that conclusion.” These are not narrow, technical criticisms capable of being “designed out” through limited rescoping. They indicate fundamental, systemic risks requiring full re-examination through a rigorous, transparent EES process.

**Downstream risk to the Gippsland Lakes system and water quality values**

The Gippsland Lakes is a sensitive, interconnected estuarine-lagoon system, and its condition is strongly influenced by catchment and groundwater processes. Even where impacts occur “upstream,” the relevant question for public decision-making is whether the project could contribute to changes in water quantity and water quality, such as altered flows, increased sediment and contaminant pathways, or cumulative impacts that are difficult to reverse once damage occurs.

The previous assessment record notes risks extending beyond the immediate project footprint, including risks to the Gippsland Lakes Ramsar site. Given the Lakes’ environmental significance and vulnerability, a referral-level pathway is not an adequate basis to test downstream risks, cumulative impacts, or long-term uncertainties.



## **Water remains a critical unresolved issue**

For FoGL, water is the central issue because water is the primary pathway through which impacts can propagate to the Lakes system.

The previous Assessment identified “considerable uncertainty” regarding water demand, water availability, groundwater modelling, baseline data, and long-term impacts on aquifers and surface water systems, with serious concern about introducing a high-water-use project into a drying, water-limited region.

Critically, the referral still does not transparently establish key water matters, including:

- the total volume of water required;
- the secure and sustainable source of that water;
- impacts on groundwater dependent ecosystems;
- long-term consequences for agricultural and community water security; and
- the effect of climate change on water availability.

Without a full EES these matters cannot be properly tested through independent scientific review and public scrutiny. FoGL submits these uncertainties go directly to the precautionary principle and the integrity of decision-making for a region already under climate and water stress.

## **Biodiversity, amenity and cumulative effects are inseparable from water outcomes**

We also note that the earlier assessment identified unacceptable impacts across core planning considerations, including biodiversity and native vegetation values, with threatened species and ecological communities at risk, and explicitly linked those risks to broader regional environmental values (including the Lakes Ramsar site).

The previous assessment record also raised serious concerns regarding air quality/dust and the reliability of “adaptive management” approaches, particularly where sensitive receptors and high-value land uses are present. These issues matter for FoGL not only as local amenity impacts, but because they often intersect with water outcomes (for example, through deposition, runoff pathways, and cumulative stressors). Only a full EES can robustly integrate these interlinked risks.



## **Economic and tourism values tied to the health of the wider Gippsland Lakes catchment**

The Gippsland Lakes and catchment supports a substantial tourism and recreation economy, with boating, fishing, hospitality, accommodation, events, and nature-based visitation, that depends on clean water, healthy ecosystems, and a strong regional reputation. Any degradation of river and lake water quality or waterways amenity can translate into long-lived economic harm and loss of community wellbeing.

We are also concerned that claims of “state significance” and fast-tracking should be treated with caution where environmental risk is high and economic justification is contested, highlighting the need for *more* scrutiny, not less.

## **Planning integrity and procedural fairness**

FoGL shares concerns that alternative approval pathways which curtail community rights (including objection and appeal rights) would be inconsistent with the objectives of the planning framework and would undermine confidence in decision-making, especially for a project previously determined to have unacceptable environmental effects. A full EES process remains the most credible mechanism to ensure transparency, independence, and procedural fairness.

## **Request**

For these reasons, Friends of Gippsland Lakes respectfully requests that you determine the rescoped Fingerboards Project requires a new Environmental Effects Statement, including full and independent assessment of ecological and hydrological risks, social and economic impacts (including downstream impacts to the Gippsland Lakes and its tourism economy), and meaningful public participation throughout the process.

Yours sincerely,

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