



Mineral Resources Minister Susan Shabangu

PHOTO: JEFFREY ABRAHAMS

CoAL rail plan faces farmers' resistance

■ Coal of Africa seeks permission for railway to cross nine farms

Wiseman Khuzwayo

CoAL OF Africa Limited (CoAL) has again sailed into an environmentally-charged storm over its plans to build a R300 million railway line north of the Soutpansberg in the Limpopo River basin.

The mining firm plans to transport coal from the Makhado project to ArcelorMittal South Africa in Vanderbijlpark. Farmers who will be affected by the railway line running through their farms are said to be ready to resist the plans.

Last year, CoAL met with organised resistance from environmental groups against its development of the Vele coking coal project, based near the World Heritage Site, Mapungubwe, over environmental concerns.

It was reported on Friday that CoAL environmental consultant Marietjie Eksteen said

at a meeting for interested parties at the company's head office in Johannesburg that the railway line, with a projected cost of R22.5m, would cross nine farms, including four game farms.

She said 400 indigenous trees, several of them protected, would have to be removed, and the company would apply for permits to do so.

Eksteen added that CoAL was planning to erect a game fence on both sides of the track.

Meanwhile, the farmers have formed the Makhado Action Group to resist the project.

Christo Reeders, an attorney representing the group, said the farmers would vehemently resist the project.

He said the map produced by CoAL also showed that the railway line would pass over 22km of farmland but it did not show any boundaries.

He said environmental

authorisation was required for the majority of new mining projects.

The Environmental Management Programme (EMP) submitted by CoAL in December last year should have been rejected by Mineral Resources Minister Susan Shabangu "because it was incomplete", Reeders said.

While "only one portion of three was submitted", his nine-page letter to Shabangu on the matter had never been acknowledged, Reeders said.

The Department of Mineral Resources said on Friday: "Coal of Africa submitted its EMP and no decision has been taken due to the fact that there are objections from interested and affected parties. Therefore, the Regional Mining Development and Environmental Committee (Remdec) has to first advise or recommend whether to approve (it) or not."

A Remdec meeting had been convened a month ago but it was postponed, Reeders said.

Furthermore, CoAL also still had to submit a water use application because there was no water on site while the company wanted to pump recycled sewage water from 180km away, Reeders added.

He said the rail corridor was intended to be 30m wide.

Likening the railway line to CoAL's mining near Mapungubwe, Reeders said: "If left to their own devices, this company (CoAL) would not respect a single piece of legislation in this country."

Makhado Action Group chairman Francis Nicholson said on Friday that there was no water in the area and mining would pollute whatever water there was.

The management of CoAL were locked in a meeting on Friday and could not comment.