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Mining tales of survival

BY IAN KIRKWOOD

A FULL-HOUSE audience of 540 sat in stunned silence as the explosives expert who blasted an underground tunnel to the trapped Beaconsfield miners gave a tearful recounting of the situation to Monday's opening day of the annual NSW Minerals Council health, safety, environment and community conference at Cessnock.

Darren Flanagan, who has begun a second career as a motivational speaker as a result of efforts at the Tasmanian mine in April 2006, held the conference delegates spellbound during a 40-minute performance that was part confession of the fear he held about his own abilities to do the job – it took 70 underground blasts to tunnel through 30 metres of hard rock to reach the men – and part reminder that “freak accidents” can often be avoided, or their impacts minimised, by careful planning.

Organisers said this year's conference at Crowne Plaza, Lovedale, sold out for the second year in a row – another sign of the resurgence of the coal industry and the other mining sectors represented at the conference.

Mr Flanagan was not the only emotional speaker on

the Monday program.

Immediately before him, the crowd was held similarly enraptured as Canadian medico, author and deep-sea diver Dr Joe MacInnis told how teamwork, communication and attention to detail were at the heart of his friend James Cameron's 2012 dive to the deepest waters on earth, the Mariana Trench, 11 kilometres down in the Pacific Ocean near Guam.

Despite the lengths that Cameron and his team went to in ensuring the safety of the operation, two film-makers documenting the expedition lost their lives when the helicopter they were filming

from crashed where the team was preparing the sub near Nowra.

It was a moment that weighed heavily on all the team, and Dr Macinnis told how he had noticed the pilot – like all of them – was tired, and how he'd wished he urged him not to fly.

Safety was also on the mind of NSW Resources Minister Dr Harwin, who said the NSW mining industry had a safety performance that was “better than other industries such as agriculture, transport and storage and construction”.

“Two national work health and safety targets – to reduce fatalities by 20 per

cent and lost-time serious injuries by 40 per cent in the ten years from 2007 to 2016 were achieved by the industry,” the Liberal MLC said.

“Since 2013, there has been a 20 per cent decrease in the rate of lost time injuries and industry is on track to meeting the national tar-

get to reduce the number of lost time incidents by 30 per cent by 2022.

“This is all satisfying, but there is still work to do, because your industry is more challenging than almost any other. Despite the progress, there was still one fatality during 2017-18, as well as 79 serious injuries and 170 lost-time injuries.”

Safety in NSW mining is covered by an organisation known as the Resources Reg-

ulator, which is held within the NSW Department of Planning and Environment.

Mr Harwin said the regulator responded to 1774 mine safety incident notifications in the year to June 30 and issued 1255 safety notices, of which 231 were prohibition notices. As well, 20 major safety investigations were begun in relation to the death or serious injury of mine workers.

Speaking in place of Labor's resources spokesperson, Adam Searle, Cessnock



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MP Clayton Barr said the debate over energy resources was unfortunately polarised between “the insanity of shut down coal yesterday at one end, and the insanity of let it rip no matter what the costs at the other”.

But Mr Barr said there was a “sensible middle ground” that would prevail.

Even so, he said that environmentally, the industry

had to avoid “kicking (problems) out to eternity.

Speaking about mining rehabilitation and final voids, Mr Barr said: “Imagine in two or three or four generations, our great-great grandchildren looking back at us and saying ‘holy cow, what were they thinking at the time?’”

At the same time, he said he had been to mines such as Bloomfield, and seen “incredible regeneration out there, you wouldn’t know there’s ever been a coalmine out there”.

Speaking on the future of the industry, Mr Barr said “most people” understood that the NSW coal industry was export oriented, so while we could have a debate over the types of electricity generation we used domestically, the industry would continue.

“We all have to acknowledge that we have decades and decades of mining in front of us,” Mr Barr said.

“We will still be digging coal out of the ground here in the Hunter Valley long after I am pushing up daisies.”

In a pre-lunch discussion panel, the chief executive of the NSW Minerals Council, Stephen Galilee, Centennial Coal’s executive general

manager of external affairs, Katie Brassil, and Yancoal Australia’s executive general manager of environment and community, Mark Jacobs, spoke of the challenges

facing the industry with the conference’s master of ceremonies, Natasha Beyersdorf.

Ms Brassil cited long delays in the China Shenua Watermark project on the Liverpool Plains and the Wallarah II project on the Central Coast as examples of problems with approval times.

She also said it was taking too long to get approval on “brownfield” projects such as mine extensions.

Mr Jacobs described the NSW approvals system as “dysfunctional”.

“For me, it’s death by 1000 cuts, and every year gets worse and I would argue from a regulatory perspective we are substantially worse off,” Mr Jacobs said.

He pointed to the Queensland system, where a Co-ordinator General managed the assessment and approval of large infrastructure and mining projects, as an im-

provement on the situation in NSW. He said that in this state, you had various government agencies making things difficult “behind the scenes”. “We are getting increased regulation for, in some respects, no better environmental outcome,” Mr Jacobs said.

The theme of this year’s conference is “share, innovate, succeed”, and Mr Galilee said the nine finalists in the conference’s annual awards showed the impor-

tance of innovation.

One of the finalists showcased on Monday was from Glencore’s Ravensworth mine, where a drone carrying a nitrous oxide monitor had been flown repeatedly over blasts at the mine to give a better understanding of the level of fumes and the way they dispersed in the atmosphere.

Another finalist was an innovation in a coal crushing mill at the Ravensworth coal preparation plant that allowed the use of a hydraulic flange splitter, rather than a sledgehammer, when disassembling the mill. Yancoal’s Tasman mine is a finalist for the rehabilitation of its surface area since its 2014 closure.

The conference continues on Tuesday and finishes on Wednesday afternoon.



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PURE EMOTION: Beaconsfield rescuer and explosives expert Darren Flanagan during his emotional recounting of the 2006 rescue.



DEEP WATER: Dr Joe MacInnis, 81, was James Cameron's personal physician in 2012 when the filmmaker took his purpose-built mini-sub to the bottom of the deepest waters on earth, the Mariana Trench between New Guinea and Japan. **Pictures:** David Wilson, Event Photography