

Green protest against Wakkerstroom mine

Ilse de Lange

Environmentalists yesterday staged a protest outside the High Court in Pretoria in support of an application to stop coal mining activities inside the Mabola Protected Environment, near Wakkerstroom in Mpumalanga.

Eight civil society and community organisations, represented by the Centre for Environmental Rights, brought an urgent application to stop Indian-owned mining company Atha-Africa Ventures from commencing with any mining and related activities without environmental authorisation

and local planning approval.

The application was postponed until today for a possible settlement agreement.

The coalition consists of groundWork, the Mining and Environmental Justice Community Network of SA, Earthlife Africa Johannesburg, Birdlife SA, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, Federation for a Sustainable Environment, Association for Water and Rural Development and the Bench Marks Foundation.

The Centre for Environmental rights said the Mabola Protected Environment area in which Atha-Africa wanted to build a massive underground coal mine fell within a strategic water source area which was

vital for producing water for local communities and had been identified as incredibly important for all South Africans.

The area consisted mostly of wetlands, pans and grassland and was a source of four major rivers – the Tugela, the Vaal, the Usutu and the Pongola – that provided water to a huge number of downstream water users, who would be negatively affected if the sources of those rivers were compromised.

The Mineral Resources Minister granted mining rights in 2015, shortly after the declaration of the protected area by the Mpumalanga MEC. Since then, Atha had received licences and approvals from the Mpumalan-

ga environment department, the department of water and sanitation and the Minister of Environmental Affairs.

The coalition has challenged all of the approvals through internal appeals, launched a judicial review in the high court against the original mining right granted and also plans to seek a review of the minister's decision to approve mining in a protected area.

The centre said the organisations would – if necessary take – the matter to the Constitutional Court. They launched the urgent application after Atha-Africa refused to provide an undertaking not to proceed with the mine.