

South32 sponsors Ride Wollongong

A naming rights sponsorship deal has alienated the community this festival would like to attract, writes Genevieve Swart

The decision to appoint miner South32 as the naming rights sponsor of September's Ride Wollongong festival has shocked the climate-conscious cycling community.

"The event's a great idea. But I don't want to go to it now, unless it's part of an action to oppose the sponsorship," says local cycling advocate Jess Whittaker.

"We're in a climate emergency. I can't look my kids in the eye and say, 'We're going to this cycling event – it's paid for by a coal mine. And by the way, they're burning your future and stuffing the water catchment.'"

The Ride Wollongong Festival of Cycling is a 2022 UCI Road World Championships legacy event by Destination Wollongong, a not-for-profit tourism body majority funded by Wollongong City Council. Set to take place in the city on September 23 and 24, the festival was announced on July 20, when local media were invited to a photo opportunity at Lang Park featuring Mark Sleight, general manager of Destination Wollongong, and the city's Lord Mayor, Gordon Bradbery, who rode a tandem bicycle with a South32's Illawarra Metallurgical Coal community relations representative, Antony Leone.

The Climate Council's head of advocacy, Dr Jennifer Rayner, described South32's sponsorship of Ride Wollongong as "sports washing", a form of greenwashing. "Sports washing is when they

[companies] use their association with the sports, arts and public events Australians love to try and purchase social licence, to purchase the idea that they are good companies."

In May 2023, the independent Climate Council published *Calling Time: How to Remove Fossil Fuel Sponsorships from Sports, Arts and Events*, a voluntary code for organisations.

Dr Rayner said, "The South32 sponsorship of Ride Wollongong is a really good example of the problem that we're talking about here. So that is a big mining company that has a really significant role to play in the coal market. And that company is contributing to harmful climate change through its product at the same time as it's sponsoring a community event, which is at increasing risk of disruption because of extreme weather and the risk of harmful climate change."



L to R: Mark Emerton, CEO of Elite Energy Events, Lord Mayor Gordon Bradbery AM, South 32 representative Antony Leone and Mark Sleight, general manager of Destination Wollongong. Above, Lord Mayor Gordon Bradbery and South32's Antony Leone. Photos supplied by event publicists

In a statement on August 28, Wollongong City Lord Mayor Councillor Gordon Bradbery AM said: “Ride Wollongong is not a Council run event but I attended the launch because I want to promote cycling in our City. I don’t believe South 32’s sponsorship of Ride Wollongong detracts from a key objective of the event, namely to encourage cycling for fun and for active transport.”

View from ‘Beyond Coal Coast’

July’s Lang Park media call – which locals dubbed a “bikewash” – came nine days after South32 made national headlines after agreeing to pay a record sum of \$2.9 million. The Natural Resources Access Regulator had found works at South32’s Dendrobium mine at Mt Kembla had drained up to five megalitres a day – the equivalent of two Olympic swimming pools – from the Sydney water catchment without a licence from 2018 to 2023.

Sallie Moffatt, a spokesperson for grassroots group Beyond Coal Coast, said while a Festival of Cycling was fantastic, it needed sponsorship “from companies whose corporate values enhance a positive environmental message and not from those who seek to launder their image through sportswashing”.

“Beyond Coal Coast would like to see Destination Wollongong and the Lord Mayor collaborating with responsible corporate citizens in the upcoming Festival of Cycling.”

More questions than answers

Neither South32 nor Destination Wollongong responded to questions about how much money the mining company contributed to the festival.

South32 declined to comment.

Destination Wollongong general manager Mark Sleigh did not directly respond to questions, with publicity outsourced to a Wollongong firm and event management to a Nowra company.

The *Illawarra Flame* received a statement from ‘the Ride Wollongong team’ signed by Mark Emerton, CEO of a Nowra-based multi-sport events company, Elite Energy Events. It read: “Grassroots community events such as the Ride Wollongong Festival of Cycling are only possible through the support of commercial partners ... South 32 was involved in the delivery of the World Championships in 2022 and is keen to continue supporting cycling within the region.”

The full statement is available on our website.

Ms Whittaker, a Port Kembla health care worker who ran as the Greens lead candidate in Ward 3 at the last Wollongong City Council election in December 2021, said: “You don’t have to have hundreds of thousands of dollars to put on a community event. The council should just be funding that.”

Destination Wollongong is a not-for-profit body funded by Council with more than 200 business partners, who pay annual fees of \$400 to \$3500. (*The Illawarra Flame* is a member.)

“Wollongong City Council will provide \$1.55 million to Destination Wollongong this financial year (2023-2024). This equates to 85% of their total funding,” a council spokesperson said.

South32’s Appin Mine Community Consultative Committee meeting minutes, dated 21 Sept 2022, show the company contributed \$50,000 to the 2022 UCI Road World Championships. Its records for Ride Wollongong were not published at press time.

Destination Wollongong is a separate entity to Wollongong City Council, with an independent board and its own charter.

Council referred questions about rate payers’ response to South32’s sponsorship to Destination Wollongong, and a Destination Wollongong publicist referred that question to Council.

Bigger than one local event

Ultimately the ‘sportswashing’ problem is bigger than any one company, said Dr Rayner, who cited the Santos Tour Down Under as another example of an event feeling the heat of climate change. “And yet the companies that are doing so much to fuel harmful climate change are still slapping their logos all over those events,” she said.

Of South32’s sponsorship of Ride Wollongong, Ms Whittaker said: “In some ways it’s good it’s happened because it’s so bad that it really highlights why we need to ban fossil fuel advertising.”

Despite being a keen cyclist, Ms Whittaker won’t be attending this month’s South32 Ride Wollongong festival.

“I just can’t do it. It was the same feeling I got at UCI when they were handing out all those yellow hats with South32 logos and I just felt so embarrassed. All these people come over from Europe and we’re in a climate emergency and here’s good old Wollongong handing out the hats for the coal mine.”

“I actually took a hat home and embroidered ‘end coal’ on it and then wore it back the next day.” 🌟



Jess Whittaker's repurposed hat.
Photo: Jess Whittaker, 2022