

Submission to Inquiry into the impacts of mining in the Murray Darling Basin

To: Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts

From: Janet Cox

Background

With my husband, I farm on the Haystack Plain, which is part of the Darling Downs in Queensland and currently threatened with mining. We are proud of our profession, and we are proud of our address. We feed the world, and we do it on one of the most inherently productive floodplains in the world. My husband is a fourth generation farmer of more than fifty years experience, and we have two adult sons, one of which is a qualified fitter and turner, who are also farmers. I also have a farming background through my mothers family although I grew up in cities. I have a background in banking, but sustainable production of healthy food is my pride.

We are graingrowers on some of the most inherently fertile and productive ground in Australia, and indeed the world.

As a farmer and committee member of the Haystack Road Coal Committee, a mother and grandmother, and a member of society I am deeply worried and concerned about the future of food production in this country and the loss of arable land to mining and the impact it will have on all our descendants worldwide.

Submission

The Murray Darling River System is an integral part of life in this country. It has been the lifeblood of western communities since these areas were first settled well over a hundred years ago and in modern times has been abused to such an extent that it is now in an extremely dire and precarious position.

The issuing of too many irrigation licences has caused massive problems and once again it is a case of “closing the gate after the horse has bolted”. Is this to be allowed to happen again with the issuing of mining licences where the results of errors in the handling of mined substances will be catastrophic all the way from the headwaters of the Condamine River in Queensland to the Coorong at the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia? This is not just a few thousand acres but most of the Darling Downs of Queensland, much of western New South Wales and on to some of the most productive country in South Australia.

The Surat Basin in Queensland, which includes the Murray Darling Basin, is fast becoming a mining dream and an agricultural nightmare with the mining sector travelling at an unprecedented rate and money hungry Government incapable of saying no. The future of our food supplies relies very heavily on the decisions we make today. We need to choose very carefully where we mine for if we destroy our very best food producing country there will be no going back. This will not only be

through the destruction of prime agricultural land but also from the consequences of mining mishaps.

The Haystack Plain where my farming enterprise is situated is at present covered by MDL383 owned by Tarong Energy. This country is a flood plain with .02degrees of slope and produces vast quantities of food without irrigation. Tarong Energy plans to onsell this MDL and should it be used for open cut mining the consequences of a flood would impact right through the Murray Darling System as the water off this country flows directly into the Condamine River. Any diversions around the mine would have detrimental impact on surrounding properties. Open cut mining would destroy this country forever as rehabilitation to anywhere near its present state has never been done. Neal Menzies, UQ Professor of Soil and Environmental Chemistry, thoughts on rehabilitation can be read in Attachment 1 and supports this statement.

Long wall mining would also destroy the farmability of this very flat country as any undue depressions would become swamps and unworkable thereby destroying food productivity. The salt brought to the surface by coal seam methane opens up a whole new set of problems. We can ill afford the results of this salt and toxic waste products being spread across our valuable farming lands of the Murray Darling Basin. Even with treatment we do not know the long term results of using this water. Where re-injection of water has been carried out in America “local communities are finding previously pure aquifers becoming contaminated with saline water and toxic waste products” (Australian Financial Review 21/8/09).

We have had examples of mining disasters in the last 12 months at the Ensham Mine in Central Queensland, the Lady Annie Mine in North West Queensland and presently in the Timor Sea. These incidents should be a wake up call for us all. We cannot keep ignoring these warnings.

We need to cherish our food producing country like no other thing. We have very skilled farmers who know their land and are there because of their affinity with the soil. These men and women daily do their best to produce more and more food off the same area of land through their desire to be able to do something good for mankind and feed not only fellow Australians, but to be able to pass on the surplus to the rest of the world.

Syngenta’s Winter 2008 magazine Gro states that “Global grain stocks are now at their lowest level since 1982, with a meagre 50 days worth of grain storage around the world.” And also that “Given the scale of the global food challenge, farmers in countries such as Australia will have to play a crucial role if we are to achieve success.” Mining of our prime farming lands in the Murray Darling Basin will only exacerbate an already dwindling commodity which is irreplaceable.

The issuing of mining licences over premium farming country shows a total disregard for the very basis of life – food. It shows a complete deficit of knowledge about what is required to produce food by the issuers of these licences and a ‘happy go lucky’ attitude that is behind the lack of foresight that seems to afflict the government in its greed to sell off Australia at any cost. It is also ridiculous to believe that once mined these areas can be restored to former productivity – we are only human.

Action must be taken now to protect our greatest asset, our very productive but very small areas of prime agricultural land. There is no way that we can retrieve this land once it is gone. There will be no “buy backs” of land as they are doing with water in the Murray Darling. There will be no land.

There are huge areas in this State where mining would have minimal impact and in fact be beneficial to the local economy, but leave our premium agricultural areas to continue producing for generations to come. In 30 years time, when mining has left its legacy, the industries that now thrive and prosper on the agriculture sector will be gone. The country will be unable to support them. There is no logic in discarding a long term viable and very vital industry for a short term industry that can only leave a very depleted and second rate commodity in its place. Mining of the Murray Darling Basin foodbowl should be approached with great caution for if we play Russian roulette with such an integral part of this country we will surely be the losers in the long term. We only get one chance and we have to get it right first time.

Summary

We need legislation to protect our prime agricultural areas and in the mean time we need moratoriums on the areas at present under threat.

We should be mining our poorest and least productive food areas first. To mine our best, first, just because it already has infrastructure in place is no justification for driving humanity down the path of food shortages.

Thankyou for your time taken reading this article.

Janet Cox