

RE: Inquiry into the impacts of mining in the Murray Darling Basin

Firstly, I express my thanks to the Senate for offering this opportunity to communicate some of our experiences and observations relating to exploration and mining in central-west Queensland. Our region faces many of the same issues as the Murray-Darling Basin, the rest of the state and on a broader scale, Australia.

Inadequate protection of areas of conservation and agricultural value

Of key concern is the inadequate and inconsistent legislation regarding biological conservation in the face of mining interests. Given the continuing decline of ecological health and resilience in Australia, it is deplorable that many important 'protected areas' are not secure from destructive exploration and mining practices. Unfortunately I have had first-hand experience with this issue as I am part owner of the 8000 hectare Bimblebox Nature Refuge (IUCN category VI protected area). The refuge is comprised of remnant woodland and native grasslands and is part of the National Reserve System but is directly in line of a massive proposed coal development in the Galilee Basin, which has less than 3% of land area held in conservation reserves. The property is exemplary for its sustainable management with beef cattle and it's hosting of a number of scientific projects conducted by the Queensland Herbarium, DERM and the CSIRO.

As current policy stands, there is no guaranteed protection for areas of high conservation significance when minerals are found beneath the soil. I will briefly outline our experience below, to demonstrate the kind of potential environmental impacts that are also likely to emerge in the Murray-Darling Basin.

Bimblebox Nature Refuge is situated in the Desert Uplands, a bioregion declared a Biodiversity Hotspot, but which has less than 3% of land area held in conservation reserves. It is in a district that has been heavily cleared over the past couple of decades and for this reason the ecologically-intact property drew the attention of the National Reserve System program, which contributed substantial funding for its purchase in 2000. A 'perpetual' Nature Refuge Agreement was signed in 2003 with the Queensland government.

The nature refuge status of our property obliged the exploration company to develop an environmental management plan before exploration could proceed and through this some minor provisions were placed on the exploration activities. This was a feeble attempt to protect the value of our property and some of the provisions were breached. While there was damage to the roads from the heavy machinery, this issue pales into insignificance given the potential destruction of our property if mining is allowed to proceed.

The absurdity in all this is that we have taken seriously our role as guardians of our remnant piece of bush (with carbon stores and biodiversity intact), but our efforts are poised to be badly debilitated so that more coal might be extracted and shipped to China.

Cumulative impacts

I believe the recent explosion of coal, petroleum and underground coal gasification interests in the Galilee Basin provide further lessons for the Murray-Darling Basin. In essence, our experience here shows that there is currently little or no regional impact assessment process in place to evaluate the serious cumulative social, environmental and economic impacts of new mining developments, even when such impacts are likely to be large. Indeed, a recent motion put forward by Senator Bob Brown to address some of these concerns in the Galilee Basin was rejected. I believe that a systematic regional assessment process is required in all regions, with thorough and widely considered terms of reference.

Of particular concern is a current inadequacy in the federal EPBC legislation, which can only consider case-by-case proposals rather than review the potential impacts on matters of National Environmental Significance at a regional/bio-regional scale. The potential habitat changes resulting from climate change are currently not being considered, but must be in future assessments.

Water

It is understood that the availability of water is one of the major requirements of a mine. Several massive open-cut and long-wall mines are proposed for the area north of Alpha, which coincides with the recharge zone of the Great Artesian Basin (GAB). Despite recent efforts to reduce the pressure on the GAB, to date there has been no assessment of the likely impacts that these mines might have on the quality and quantity of water feeding the GAB. If the iconic and important GAB does not receive thorough, cumulative impact assessments, then it is unlikely that less iconic ground water resources will get the attention they deserve prior to the commencement of exploration and mining. Indeed, only within the last twelve months has there been a federally-funded initiative to gauge what might be the cumulative impacts on water resources from mining in general.

Locally, people in our district are almost exclusively dependent on bore water for their lives and livelihoods. For the property owners directly adjoining the proposed coal mine sites there have been no guarantees that the water supply will be left unchanged or that they will receive compensation if there are negative impacts on the quantity and/or quality of the supply. Also rarely considered are the impacts that altered water tables might have on ground-water dependent ecosystems.

Social and economic impacts

Our experience in this region is that the short-term promise of revenue that small towns and state governments will receive from jobs and mining royalties distracts from any serious assessment of alternatives to mining as sustainable development options. Also rarely discussed are the long term social and economic impacts, such as when a mining operation ceases, and people and employment leave small regional towns, and the impact that has on house prices, schools and hospitals and other town services.

Our experience of mining-based towns in central-west Queensland has been that many mining jobs are filled by workers migrating in from elsewhere, and consequently there has been a drop in the level of trust within our communities. Towns will transform their economies from being rural to mining based, the remaining agriculture and grazing industries

have little chance to attract tradesmen, as the mining wages are unsustainably high. This pool of 'cashed-up' workers are ready to pay high mortgages for homes, vehicles and all other commodities. As an example of economic impacts, rentals in Alpha have risen from \$50 to \$250-300 a week and people that were using rental properties have either been forced out of town or are having to seek employment in the mines to pay for the higher costs of living. Consequently, jobs within the local community have been abandoned and the availability of the workforce for existing industries is on the decline.

Other issues

Long-wall mining

Underground mining is often presented as a less destructive alternative to open-cut mining. However, issues of subsidence and water table impacts must be thoroughly investigated before such claims are considered.

Agricultural land

In the interests of national and global food security, all efforts should be made to protect prime agricultural land from any negative impacts from mining. I also believe that other agricultural lands deserve exemption from mining, especially those with sustainable, or 'exceptional', management objectives for the vital role they play as exemplars of good land management sorely needed in the Australian context of widespread land degradation.

Demand on individuals and volunteer community groups

Also central to our experience, and of concern for exploration and mining development in the Murray-Darling Basin, is the responsibility placed on individuals and community groups to respond to development proposals and to represent the interests of the environment and the health and well-being of communities. Together with friends and family concerned about mining in our district, we have probably spent thousands of unpaid hours writing submissions and raising awareness of the threat facing our nature refuge. I believe it is plainly unfair that the onus is on us as busy working people to be constantly vigilant to any new proposals and to have to oppose a grossly wealthy and powerful industry to argue that the losses might outweigh any benefits from these new developments. There is no one for the increasing number of stakeholders to turn to for advice and help in what now is a very concerning issue.

Additionally, local councils starved of state funding for years, are now being persuaded to take advantage of the opportunities promised by mining giants to improve local infrastructure and services such as health and education. These promises are vague and offer no guarantees. Councils are ignoring the threats of global warming and disregarding the concerns of the stakeholders set to lose their properties to the venture, thus becoming putty in the coal mining industry's hands.

The hunger of our governments for coal revenue is overshadowing any common sense and is destroying both fertile and high conservation lands that are irreplaceable. In 20 to 30 years of mining in Queensland, rehabilitation has been purely cosmetic and artificial. There has been no EFFECTIVE rehabilitation to date.

Remnant conservation areas, fertile agricultural soils, rivers, streams, subterranean water tables and rural and regional communities are some of the (often hidden) casualties in the rush to exploit Australia's coal reserves. In the dying decades of the out-of-date fossil fuel industry, it seems that there is little, if anything, that can stop the jaws of the coal industry.

Coal and climate change

Perhaps overshadowing any issues raised above is the concern of an expanding coal industry that is tapping into the enormous coal reserves in Queensland and New South Wales. I believe that by pursuing coal development in Australia we risk being guilty of gross negligence to the global environment, habitats and populations that are set to be worse-off under changed climatic conditions. I believe we have to seize the spirit of the times and seriously pursue an alternative path other than our addiction to coal revenue.

What benefit is Australia really deriving from the massive social and economic disruption caused by the current mining boom, especially in regional communities? And how are these regional communities benefiting from increased housing costs (the result of a transient work force), spiralling population growth and the massive development of infrastructure which is needed to service the multinationals? One might wonder how long it will be before the entire short-term quarry-based economy collapses.

Is this how Australia is preparing for the future of her children, as miners seize the profits and the rural community is left to pick up the pieces? The fact that our government puts mining before agriculture is ludicrous.

Water is our most scarce and precious resource, protecting it must come before exporting fossil fuels and before it is too late.

Yours sincerely,

Paola Cassoni