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Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts

PO Box 6100

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Australia

## ***INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACTS OF MINING IN THE MURRAY DARLING BASIN***

Dear Committee Secretary,

Please accept AgForce Queensland's response to the Senate inquiry into the *Impacts of Mining in the Murray-Darling Basin*. AgForce represents thousands of Queensland beef, sheep and wool, and grains producers who recognise the value in having a strong voice. These broad-acre industries manage 80% of the Queensland landmass for production and most regional and rural economies are dependent on these industries directly and indirectly for their livelihood.

The Senate inquiry into the impacts of mining in the Murray Darling Basin, particularly as it effects agricultural productivity, is both a timely and important reminder of the importance of food and fibre production in this country, which feeds and clothes not only our own population, but much of the world's as well; and also contributes to the long-term sustainable contribution of the agriculture sector to Australia's GDP.

Primary industries directly contribute over \$13 billion per annum to the Queensland economy and are a sustainable and renewable resource. Agricultural land in Queensland is now being consumed by the resources sector at an unprecedented rate with a permanent reduction in their agricultural capacity. With over 80% of Queensland now under exploration permits and the growing impact of the resources sector on more intensively farmed agricultural land; the conflict between the two sectors is also increasing. Whilst AgForce is not opposed to mining or extractive industries, there are numerous issues surrounding the impacts and processes of mining applications that require redress. Effective management of the myriad of environmental, social and economic issues surrounding mining activities is required to ensure sustainable use of our natural resources and our ability to produce food and fibre in the long-term. As such we have outlined these various issues below:

### **1. Definition and excision of Good Quality Agricultural Land from mining activity**

Good Quality Agricultural Land (GQAL) has been defined and categorized in Queensland by the Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM). GQAL is a finite resource (comprising less than 5% of Australia's total landscape) and as such must be conserved and managed in perpetuity if the nation's ability to produce food and fibre is to remain uncompromised.

One of the primary issues with the incursion of mining into areas of GQAL in Queensland is that no mine site has ever been able to rehabilitate good quality agricultural soil to its former productive state. Most



mines remove the topsoil and stockpile it for rehabilitation - however this stockpiling changes the soil structure, texture and nutrient availability. Thus mining that disturbs areas of Good Quality Agricultural Land could mean good soil and productive farming land is lost forever.

## **2. Disturbance and rehabilitation**

The recent resources boom has seen an increase in the total area covered by exploration and mining tenements for minerals and petroleum in Queensland increase from 41.7 million hectares in 2003 to 65.9 million hectares in 2006 – that is a total increase of 58% in 4 years and a rate of land disturbance at almost 30% per annum higher than 2002 (Queensland State of the Environment 2007).

Conversely, the rate of rehabilitation of mine sites in Queensland is less than half the rate of disturbance. With more than 15,000 abandoned mine sites recorded throughout the state, this worrying trend is all the more pertinent given the recent toxic mine spill events experienced in North West Queensland in February of this year. The subsequent pollution from these events engendered massive fish kills, turned rivers blue and left water unsuitable for drinking and dangerous to livestock, resulting in substantial problems for graziers and local communities that are still ongoing.

The risk of a similar event occurring in the Murray Darling Basin would be catastrophic in terms of environmental impacts as well as impinging on the ability of primary producers' to run their business. Effects would also be compounded as a result of the Basin's already well-documented problems with salinity.

## **3. Cumulative Impacts on land area and lifestyle**

With the increasing encroachment of mining activities into closely settled rural areas many people find themselves adversely affected by mining related externalities, often without appropriate compensation or benefits.

Slow or poor rehabilitation of mine sites combined with increasing mining expansion (now into areas of Good Quality Agricultural Land), has resulted in the exponential increase of the mining footprint so that it is now threatening the nation's food production capabilities. This is exemplified by the recent contentious mining applications in the Felton Valley and Liverpool Plains, both situated in the Murray Darling Basin.

## **4. Impacts on Environmental Values**

The cumulative impacts on environmental values and landscape function can be seen through the effects on:

- Native vegetation coverage, ecosystem linkages, ecological processes and biodiversity condition;
- Riverine, floodplain and wetland assets and function;
- Land and soil assets;
- Increased incidences of pest and weeds; and
- Chemical residues in food.

## **5. Salinity**

The State Government estimates that in the Surat Basin alone (located in the headwaters of the Murray Darling) there is an expected annual production rate of 25 Gigalitres (GL) of Coal Seam Gas (CSG) water. This will generate 62,500 tonnes of salt per annum amounting to 1.8 million tonnes over 30 years. Waste (or associated) water that has high salt content has the potential to leak or be left behind and damage farming land and creeks, rivers and wetlands.

## **6. Social Impacts**

Impacts as a result of diminution of land value and the negative impacts on lifestyle resulting from factors such as:

- Loss of visual amenity;
- Mental and physical health of landholders close to the site and the associated strain on rural families;
- Devaluation of properties;
- Health and safety risks;
- Loss of productive farming land and associated revenue;
- Impacts of construction noise, dust and light;
- Loss of generational farming communities;
- Loss of water supply; and
- Increased traffic movements, to name a few.

## **7. Impacts on surface and groundwater flows**

The concentration of Coal Seam Gas (CSG) activities in the Murray Darling Basin has a cumulative effect on surface and groundwater systems (drawdown of bores and water quality). With over 36,000 petroleum wells planned for the Surat Basin alone over the next three to five years this issue is of prominent importance. Presently in Queensland there is no requirement for the monitoring of aquifers (surface or deep) to inspect for drainage of the surface aquifers to depth through internal interconnectivity of these water systems.

Farming in the Queensland Murray Darling Basin has a high dependence on underground water for stock and domestic supplies and irrigation. The nature of the mining industry means that it is a heavy user of water in its extraction and processing stages. These factors coupled with recent drought leaving many of Australia's river and underground reserves seriously depleted, means that the risk of water contamination and drawdown as a result of mining activities is a real and significant threat.

With the looming potential impacts of climate change and the scarcity and competition for water resources in the Murray Darling Basin, there exists a need to protect the best agricultural areas in Australia for future food production. AgForce believes it is necessary to find a balance between these two industries in the Basin and looks forward to expanding on this submission in the future if required.

For further information please contact Genevieve Johnston or Drew Wagner (Policy Advisors) on (07) 3236 3100.

Yours Sincerely,

Ian Burnett  
Mining Spokesperson and Vice-President  
AgForce Queensland