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Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment Bill 2013 [Provisions]

I am making this submission as a member of the public and as a landholder in a rural area where unconventional gas mining projects are proposed. There are already coal seam wells in the region and I have been part of consultations with landholders affected by these developments.

I urge the government to address this Amendment Bill as a matter of urgency and to expedite the processes of the Senate Inquiry so that the Bill may be passed before the September election.

I do this because I am aware of the potential of unconventional gas mining and coal mining to cause disastrous and irreversible damage to groundwater and aquifers which are essential to ongoing food production, both in my local area and in the whole country. Food security is a matter of utmost importance.

As a smallscale organic vegetable and fruit producer, I have been appalled to read of the effects of coal and gas mining on the water table and on water quality. My livelihood depends on the availability of fresh clean groundwater.

It is also crucially important that the new laws apply to shale gas, tight gas and underground coal gasification types of mining – as all of these have the potential to destroy and pollute groundwaters.

The proposed laws are a great relief to me, but I do also feel that they are potentially ineffective unless they are strengthened by allowing landholders and farmers the right to refuse coal and gas mining on their lands. Without this provision, mining companies are likely to continue their exploitation of natural resources, including water, with little regard for the protection of groundwaters on landholders' properties. With such a provision, the companies will be obliged to respect the wishes of landholders and food producers if they are to negotiate any kind of access.

This is much more preferable than the current situation – and if it is the intention of this Bill that it provides greater protection for landholders and the environment than currently exists, it is essential that it be included. As a professional social researcher, I have witnessed the disempowerment of communities by mining interests being empowered to act against the wishes of local people and I strongly recommend that there be provision in this Bill to enable landholders to refuse coal and gas mining on their lands, where it may affect their groundwater.

Likewise, those mining projects which have only recently been approved, but not yet begun, should be included in the provisions of this Bill. The impacts on groundwaters in these areas should also be assessed before any approval is acted upon.

I urge the Federal Government to take a strong and authoritative stand on this issue, because it has been historically proven that State governments are not trustworthy when given the role of environmental protection. In fact, it would be wise to extend the powers of the Federal Government Minister for the Environment to the protection of all areas of environmental importance.

I commend the Government for introducing this Bill and thank you for taking the time to read my submission.

Your sincerely

Megan James