

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

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

Background:

Having grown up on a farm, I have had firsthand experience with farming on prime farm land which is now under threat from coal mining. I have seen the implementation of farming practices which have contributed to the preservation of an area renowned for its agricultural productivity.

Submission:

I fear that mining will have a serious negative impact in the Murray Darling Basin. This area is to a large extent the food bowl of Australia – surely we should in no way jeopardize its productivity. The evidence indicates that mining results in loss of food productivity, not just for 30 years or so, but forever. It is in our nation's best interests to guard our prime farmland, particularly now that a global food crisis is looming. For most of the past decade, the world has been consuming more food than it has been producing. Joachim von Braun (Director General of the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington) has warned, "Agricultural productivity growth is only 1-2% per year – this is too low to meet population growth and increased demand." Some scientists now speak of a perpetual food crisis. The experts at the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research say we need to double our current food production by 2030 to keep up with the spiraling world population. Where will our food come from when our prime farmland has been replaced by mines? When the mining is finished, will farming be restored as before? Not according to Neil Menzies, Professor of Soil and Environmental Science at UQ and retired Professor Clive Bell. These men are experts in their field and insist such soils cannot be restored to their condition prior to mining. Having travelled the world, Professor Bell asserts that there has been no successful rehabilitation of complex soils anywhere! We would be short-sighted and irresponsible to choose coal over food in areas of prime farmland.

We have enormous reserves of coal in Australia, enough for ourselves and export for 300 years, according to Queensland Premier Anna Bligh. Surely there is no rush to mine sensitive areas which may very well never be rehabilitated.

Not only do our prime agricultural lands need protection, so do the rivers and aquifers

that water them. Maude Barlow, a Canadian water expert and the U.N. Senior Advisor on water issues, stated at the Australian Water Summit in Sydney in April, that in New South Wales at least 16 river systems have been permanently damaged as a result of careless mining practices. She said, "The devastation caused by long-wall and open-cut mining operations is as horrifying as it is widespread. The destruction of aquifers and heavy metal pollution of ground and surface water is a disgrace."

A specific concern is acid mine drainage – toxic waste that leaks into the soil around coal mines. There is no proof that this is currently being managed successfully in the long-term. Surely this alone raises enough questions that we would want to ensure that coal mining and prime food-producing land remain completely separate.

Summary:

To protect the Murray Darling River system, we need to value the environment and its importance agriculturally. This needs to be a higher priority than short-term mining revenue. There should be no mining operations where the environment and agricultural productivity of prime farmland are threatened in the long-term.

Judith Bolin (Mrs)