

Submission on protecting water resources from coal seam gas and large coal developments:

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

I encourage the government to bring these new laws to the Senate, so they can be passed before the election.

We live on a rural property at Running Stream, NSW, and depend on our groundwater for our livestock, horticultural and farming operations, as well as for domestic use. There are several springs on the property, and a spring-fed dam from which water is pumped to supply our domestic and farm needs. These springs have never run dry, even during prolonged drought periods, and a creek flowing from the dam and into neighbouring properties supplies domestic and farm water to others as well.

Proposals for coalmines and coal seam gas mining in our area are a serious threat to our water resources, and compromises to water quality or quantity or total disappearance of groundwater due to the effects of mining would make life on this farm untenable. Most landholders in our area rely on springs and creeks for their water and would be similarly affected if mining were to proceed here. That is, if their water supply was lost or compromised, their livelihoods would be ruined and farming would no longer be possible. Thus, the food we produce for town and city dwellers would not be produced any more. So protecting our water and the water of all farming operations from the predations of mining companies is vital to national food security.

Protecting wine growing and horse stud areas is all very well, but it is the farms that produce the food for the nation that need the greatest protection from mining interests. Mining that is a short-term proposition, which may create a few jobs in the short term, but which ruins natural water systems and destroys landscapes and habitats. This is permanent destruction of valuable land for a very short-term gain.

The new powers in this legislation must remain in federal control. Devolving control of these matters to the states has so far proven to be disastrous, as highlighted recently in the ICAC enquiry into the scandal surrounding the granting of coal exploration licences in the Bylong Valley. All of the state governments have a very poor track record in regard to protecting precious water resources, natural environments and vital farmland and the power to protect and make decisions relating to the environment must reside with the federal government.

I support the Greens proposition that the new laws should apply to all projects approved after February 13 this year. The big three New South Wales approvals made on February 14 – Gloucester coal seam gas and Maules Creek and Boggabri coalmines – have not yet started yet, so it is not too late for their approvals to be revisited and for the water impacts of these massive projects to be properly assessed.

The Greens also want all coal seam gas and large coalmining projects approved since Minister Burke became the environment minister to have their water impacts assessed to inform decision makers about the water impacts of developments that have been approved, and I support this proposal.

In order to protect landholders and communities from coal seam gas and large coalmines, landholders must have the right to say no to mining on their land and communities must have the right to say no to mining in their local area.

In my own area the result of approvals for large-scale coalmines is that communities have been destroyed or are being slowly destroyed (e.g. Wollar, Charbon and Cullen Bullen) and landscapes and vital water resources have been irrevocably damaged. If we are to have food security and environments that support life and farm livelihoods, the approval of coal seam gas mines and large coalmines on rural and surrounding national park and forested land must not continue.

The new water protection laws don't apply to shale gas, tight gas, and underground coal gasification. These forms of mining also threaten water resources and these new protections should apply to them as well.

The proposed new laws acknowledge that the states have a poor track record on environmental protection so it's a good first step that the proposed new laws don't allow the environment minister to hand the responsibility to protect water from coal seam gas and large coalmining to the state governments. I support the Greens proposal to apply this to all of the federal environment responsibilities.

Kind regards
Fiona Sim