

The Liverpool Plains are too valuable to risk damage by coal mining development.

A submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Impact of Mining in the Murray Darling Basin

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BACKGROUND:

I write as a private citizen to express my concern about the possible and probable risks to food production and the environment should mining be allowed to proceed in the Liverpool Plains. Having returned to live in this area after many years absence, I have become aware at first hand of the gravity of the situation should mining proceed in this and other areas of the Murray Darling Basin. My concerns are based on the risks to food security through depletion of ground water supplies, possible contamination of ground and surface water entering the Murray Darling river systems and destruction of the natural environment. My information has been drawn from the public arena.

SUBMISSION:

1. Risks to Food Security:

The following information is taken from the Gunnedah Sire and Liverpool Plains Strategic Plan (2001): Vision 2011:

- The region is recognized as a centre for excellence in agricultural production and agribusiness, and supports a variety of value added activities based on agriculture.
- The scope of traditional agricultural activities is supplemented with emerging/boutique industries adding to economic diversity and increasing representation of higher value commodities.
- The region is recognized as a leader in natural resource management and supporting continuous improvement in management practices.
- The region has a strong manufacturing sector focused on value adding to agricultural products (particularly in the food processing and machinery and equipment sectors), targeting specialist markets within Australia and overseas.

The Liverpool Plains are an extraordinary asset to Australian food production, being fertile and largely “drought-proofed” by a system of underground aquifers. These aquifers will be placed at risk by both exploration and mining per se, thus endangering food production.

This area is known as the food bowl of NSW, and is one of Australia’s richest food production areas, producing an extensive range of grains and cereals, fine quality beef (both feed-lot and grass fed) and increasingly, boutique crops such as olives, vegetables and grapes. Annual production figures are estimated to be of the value of \$400,000, and form a significant portion of agricultural exports. Commodity groups (sorghum, barley and wheat) generate significantly

greater returns in terms of \$ per hectare reflecting greater productive capacity within Gunnedah Shire and the Liverpool Plains than throughout the State.

I cannot comprehend that the Australian Government would allow this level of production to be jeopardized in an era where “food security” has become a commonplace term, and where, internationally, we have reached a situation where there are more hungry people in the world than ever before (ABC Radio report 16th September 2009). Surely, in an era where alternative energy sources are increasing in their viability, why would we risk, replace, diminish or disturb food production for coal? Over its evolution, the human race has not been known to eat coal.

2. Waters entering the Murray-Darling river system:

A Briefing Paper (No. 6/09, “Mining and the Environment” Stuart Small, NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, July 2009) states:

“Ground water may play a crucial role in maintaining stream flow during periods of severe drought and subsidence impacts on system water yield are not well understood.”

While I recognize that the results of the planned Namoi Catchment Water Study are required to clarify this issue, this statement infers to me that, in an era of climate change and ongoing drought, the flow of ground water into the river system should be viewed as precious and not to be jeopardized by diminution or pollution. It is well documented that the Murray River requires increased flows of water of acceptable quality to maintain its viability, rather than the opposite.

Coal mining requires water as part of its processing. There are reasonable concerns that water that is returned to the river system following processing contain materials such as lead, mercury, cadmium and arsenic which will further endanger the health of the river and those fish, animals, plants and humans who depend of the river water for survival. Health statistics in Lithgow have demonstrated that rates of heart disease and cancer are now 20% over the NSW average, following the addition of water outflows from the Clarence Colliery to drinking water supplies in 2002. (Sydney Morning Herald July 15 2009).

3. Damage to the natural environment:

Mining, by its very nature, entails undeniable damage to the natural environment. This is clearly evidenced in the Hunter Valley, with its extensive open cut mines, and resulting air and water pollution. The damage to natural habitat is obvious when driving through this now alien landscape – and appears so extensive that one cannot imagine its repair back to original form or state. Although underground mining below rivers and streams is reported by mining companies to present little damage, there appears to be clear evidence that subsidence and pollution due to salinity and acid drainage are extensive and that rehabilitation has not been able to redress

this damage (Pollution Ecology of the Grose River, Ian Wright). Of further concern is the conclusion that Northern hemisphere cases suggest that the Canyon coal mine discharge will continue to impair the Grose River and its ecosystems in perpetuity. Surely we can take some learnings from this and other studies, and not risk further damage to the Murray River – already clearly struggling to survive?

SUMMARY:

I am grateful for the opportunity to submit my opinion to the Senate and hope that my thoughts will assist to make politicians aware of the need for legislative change to protect our valuable water resources, existing agricultural industry and natural environment for future generations.