

Submission to Inquiry into the impacts mining coal seam gas in southern Queensland and the Murray Darling Basin

To: Senate Rural Affairs and Transport Committee

From:
Janet Cox

Background

I am a farmer from the Haystack Road area on the Darling Downs in southern Queensland. I have been directly involved in this area for over forty years and have family farming history from the late 1800's.

There have been many changes in agriculture during my lifetime and hopefully the ability to farm the floodplain of Haystack will continue and produce abundant food far into the future. This country has a history of sustainable farming practices with some of the most progressive techniques available. It is much sought after country because it is some of the best Australia and the world possesses.

Submission

The effect of the Coal Seam Gas industry on natural floodplains such as the Haystack Plain would be far reaching. This country has only a .02 degree of slope which effectively means that any disruption to the flow of water causes an on-going multiplying problem all the way to the river system, in this case the headwaters of the Murray-Darling River system. This country, in times of heavy rain becomes submerged.

The network of access roads and pipelines necessary for the gas companies to access their wells in times of wet weather would become a nightmare to the drainage of this country causing ponding and souring the ground. It would also make broadacre farming of the country extremely difficult as farmers work their land according to the size of their machinery and the lay of the land. They work it efficiently and sustainably and can ill afford the inconvenience of gas wells dotted all over their paddocks. They lose control of their land and how they carry out their business once a CSG company gains access and are seen to be an annoyance and are treated with disdain by these companies and their employees. There is no redress once a gas company has access.

Rehabilitation of gas well areas would only ever be partly successful at best with ongoing loss of productivity for many, many years after. This can be seen where old water bores have ceased to be used and the ground is still unproductive. Because Haystack is a floodplain, any discharges from these wells could spread across large areas. With each megalitre of water brought to the surface, comes 5-8 tonnes of salt which up to that time has been stored safely underground with no repercussions. The 350,000 megalitres of water to be extracted annually from the Great Artesian Basin when gas is in full swing will undoubtedly have lasting effects on landowners, townships and communities right across western Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory which rely almost completely on artesian water. Can the GAB sustain such a draw down when graziers have had to cap bores because of too great extraction which in comparison is negligible?

With expected world population growth tipped to reach 9 billion it is critical that we continue to use our most precious commodity – Strategic Cropping Land - for food production. It is unacceptable to allow any temporary and potentially destructive activity on country that is irreplaceable and in extremely short supply. These areas are intensely fertile and sustainable and will still be producing food long after the mining era if allowed to remain untouched. There are many areas that would produce little of food value and this is surely where mining activities should be proceeding. The CSG industry would no doubt be welcomed in such areas bringing an assured income to very marginal areas providing there was no detrimental effect upon the underground water.

Any mining on high quality country can only have a detrimental effect of valuations. Nobody who is genuinely interested in farming their land wants outside interference in what they rightfully own but ownership doesn't seem to stand for much when it comes to mining companies. Even freehold land means nothing when it comes to rights. The landholder doesn't have the basic right to say 'no' only the right to say 'yes' or else they are taken to court. Compensation, or whatever word is used, is distasteful, because it is not compensation we want but the right to keep on doing what we do well on what we rightfully own and to know that Australia has not wasted a limited, inestimable commodity.

With the onset of mining in this region has come the negative health impacts. The uncertainty of what is to become of an industry that has proven its worth since settlement and as the years progress has only become more productive and more necessary. Many farmers are laden with the burden of trying to defend their country, their lifestyle and retirement fund from an industry that shows no mercy, with little backing from a government which is slow to invoke legislation to protect our future food security. There are young farmers eager and willing to do the hard work but question the advisability of becoming committed to an industry that seems doomed. There are farmers advancing towards retirement, having worked all hours of the day and night, now finding themselves faced with an extremely uncertain future and a fight for their retirement which they are ill equipped to handle, wasting what precious years they have left.

Professor Julian Cribb keeps urging that we become more efficient at farming, that we need higher yielding crop varieties with which to do this and that we preserve our unquestionably finite amounts of arable farmland and still mining is encroaching on these areas at an unprecedented rate. The farming community has proved that its methods are as efficient as present technology allows. Crop varieties are ever becoming more high yielding but farmland is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

How long does it take to understand that without arable land there is no food and without food, mining and all else is nothing?

Summary

We need assured food supplies well into the future and we need it to come from our best agricultural land.

We need moratoriums on the areas at present under threat to ensure that there will be no damage to the aquifers and the GAB and no environmental damage from fracking or the by-products of the gas extraction.

Landholders need their own independent legal advice and should not have to pay for any costs associated with CSG company activities that relate to their land, including resolving disputes.

We should be mining our poorest and least productive land first. To mine our best, first, just because it already has infrastructure in place is no justification for driving humanity down the path of food shortages.

Thankyou for your consideration of this article.

Janet Cox