

SENATE INQUIRY INTO FOOD PRODUCTION IN AUSTRALIA

I am writing to express my concerns that future food production options for NSW are being systematically discarded in blind ignorance of their potential and future need.

OVERVIEW

Productive agricultural lands in reliable rainfall areas are few and are being handed over to coal mining interests without regard for their food production value today. Future potential food production value and need for new food production centres due to climate change are not criteria in the NSW government's mining approvals process. These should be central ideas for decision makers. Their prominence in the decision process should help drive the pursuit of richer employment opportunities in regional areas than currently exist – or are offered by coal mining.

I am concerned at the massive power imbalance between food producers and those supporting mining.

I am concerned that the present arrangements cause regional communities to bear the hidden costs of mining at the expense of their many industries which rely on defending and working with nature.

I note that the Minerals Council was individually invited to make a presentation to your Inquiry on food production. I hope that you will take note of my contradicting arguments regarding coexistence of agriculture and coal mining.

I hope also that the many serious omissions from the Mining Council presentation also become clear –as they told only of good news and reasonable people.

PROPOSALS IN BRIEF

- 1. A strategic decision process be decided at Federal Government level to curb (and rescind if necessary) mining decisions affecting agricultural land.***
- 2. Higher rainfall agricultural areas – especially those nearer large population centres be identified as strategic Australian resources as they hold some of the keys to the criteria/issues of food production:***
- 3. NSW's recently announced 'renewable energy precincts' be linked with formally identified regional food production centres and be pursued with vigour.***

FACTS AND ARGUMENT

- 1. THERE ARE GROUNDS FOR REGIONAL COMMUNITIES TO HAVE A REASONABLE APPREHENSION THAT NSW DECISION PROCESSES AFFECTING THEIR LIVES AND***

FOOD PRODUCING LANDS ARE BIASED IN FAVOUR OF MINING AND AGAINST FOOD PRODUCTION

NSW Government Decision Makers Want a Mining Outcome

From the NSW Premier down, one idea prevails above all others in the mining versus agriculture debate:

Coal mining generates more money than agriculture and agriculture and community aspirations will be displaced and dismissed without discussion. If there is a resource, it will be harvested.

In NSW, our Minister for Minerals and Energy asserts there is no provision for third party input into the approval of exploration licences or their renewal – regardless of where that exploration might occur. .

Our Minister for Planning has approved all coal mining applications flowing from exploration licences are approved. There is no discussion about alternatives and there is no discussion about the consequences of climate change and our response to it.

The System Assures A Mining Outcome – Against Any Argument

The intent and design of the coal mining approvals process is to approve mining – not to deliver a just and balanced decision where food production and its future potential are priorities. Here are the facts:

- agricultural land subject to exploration and mining applications is not assessed for its current food production
- the future potential of agricultural lands does not qualify for assessment at any stage of the approvals process
- until two months ago, our NSW Minister for Agriculture was also Minister for Minerals and Energy. He was sole authority for Exploration licences and exercised this wholly in pursuit of more coal mining for NSW. He rejected the notion of a conflict of interest.
- community advocates seeking to protect agricultural lands are silenced by a process which makes no provision for third party input, which dismisses early opposition during the exploration phase and then, as part of the approvals process, gives just 28 days for any opposing view
- Council LEP zonings are amended by NSW government to specifically allow mining. Gloucester Council has been cautioned in writing not to rule out coal mining in its 2010 draft LEP
- the Minister for Planning has the final say on coal mining and can approve regardless of opposition
- no application for coal mining in NSW has been rejected in the past 10 years
- the Hunter, Liverpool Plains, and now the Gloucester Valley, are in the hands of coal mining and exploration companies – despite each area's natural food production qualities – rich soils, predicted reliable rainfall, and irreplaceable aquifers.
- Each of these areas have abundant high quality water and fertility that make them prime candidates for centres of food production - as climate change ultimately will dictate.

2. 'CO-EXISTENCE' IS USED AS A SMOKE SCREEN TO JUSTIFY MINING ANYWHERE

The Minerals Council and the NSW Government assert that coal mining and agriculture can co-exist. They studiously avoid the nature of the co-existence today and its future consequences. They carefully avoid the question of the damage to potential food production.

Industrial co-existence can range from *synergistic* through *benign* to *competitive* – or *combative*. In synergistic co-existence, both industries deliver high value to each other's activities – they are complementary in favoured outcomes. Typically, in competitive co-existence, one side will exercise its greater power over the interests the other – by intent or necessity. This form of co-existence is deleterious to the weaker player.

Coal mining and agriculture 'CO-EXIST IN OPPOSITION'.

The power imbalance between coal and agriculture is enormous in each of its dimensions.

Coal mining has the statutory power, influence and the finances to win. Mining takes land by the authority of the state against any other interest. The Australian Coal Council buys support via lavish sponsorships. They win the ministers ear by direct access and spin doctors. They appear on various media to present clean coal images against the reality. They can send out a 4 page colour advertisement to every household in the Hunter and Gloucester warning against emissions trading and threaten the loss of employment.

On the other hand, agricultural communities trying to protect their food producing livelihoods, environment, and way of life are left to run cake stalls and face painting at local shows. They clamour for whatever attention they can get and send letters, emails and petitions into a Governmental void.

Open-cut Denies Co-existence

If agricultural land is taken for open-cut coal mining, the affected area is removed from food production.

The existence of the more powerful industry precludes the existence of the other. No 'co-existence' here. Around each mine and along transport corridors, coal dust becomes a significant factor in clean food production. Wide buffer zones become necessary to avoid its impact. Milk production becomes tenuous or impossible due to coal dust.

New food production defences and quality assurance costs are implicit in the mining decision and its infrastructure impacts. Co-existence, if it exists at all, is at best 'deleterious' and is likely to render the weaker industry unsustainable and unable to pursue its potential food production in terms of:

- constrained choices of food product
- higher production costs affecting affordability
- questionable viability due to affordability issues
- questionable sustainability due to higher costs and narrow remaining product options

Long-Wall Mining Means Deleterious Co-Existence

If coal extraction is by long-wall mining, we make a mistake to presume that somehow food production on the surface will happen without detriment.

Creeping subsidence is a feature of long-wall mining. Geology, soils and aquifers whose intimate balances have been built over millions of years are progressively shattered. Water-holding and supply capabilities are broken for all time.

The food producer's likely first response is more intense irrigation to keep producing what has always been produced. But 'dry spells' become 'droughts' in this circumstance. That is, the ground doesn't hold the water and in these periods there is no surface water to feed it. In pursuit of some minimal level of viability, the food producer might opt to shift to some narrow range lower value food products.

3. LOST FOOD PRODUCING POTENTIAL IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF POOR VISION

Regardless of how it happens, the need to achieve optimal food production potential is lost to short-term, poorly informed, unaccountable, government mining decisions.

The imposition of coal mining on NSW's dwindling stock of potential food producing lands is deleterious. It beggars belief that this could somehow be passed off as some sort of benign co-existence - as implied in government and coal council and minerals council statements.

The very nature of mining causes destruction of aquifers, loss of water flows, loss of soil structure and removal of agricultural land from production for as long as mining operations and faulted 'rehabilitation' take. The potential for low-input high-output food production is lost forever.

Clean air, clean water and good soils are the essential inputs to affordable, viable, sustainable and nutritional food production. They are all compromised by mining being allowed to 'co-exist' for the limited, unsustainable life of the mine.

Of course, the other important attribute of coal mining is that it must move to live. Once it reaches its minimum profitability levels, the mine must extend or close - with all its human and political consequences.

A mine's existence already in food producing areas assures a continuing creeping existence at the expense of food production. The coal company's foothold strengthens their argument to continue there. Its arguments focus on economics - jobs creation, the dire consequences of jobs lost, and the efficiencies of continuing to use the enormous investment in infrastructure.

Regardless of the alternatives available, these pro-mining arguments play well to governments with low horizons.

They only play well if coal mining is allowed into food production areas in the first instance.

PROPOSALS

1. A strategic decision process be decided at Federal Government level to curb (and rescind if necessary) mining decisions affecting agricultural land.

This is essential to ensure that food production and the health, social, environmental needs and aspirations of people living and working in food production areas be treated as Australian strategic priorities.

I propose that your Inquiry set out to remedy the current imbalance in strategic priorities. Your Inquiry could recommend that:

1. food producers and food academics be called upon to contribute – without mining involvement - to a set of criteria that they believe should be included in the assessment of competing land uses
2. community groups in agricultural areas be called upon to contribute – without mining involvement - to a set of social and environmental criteria that they believe should be included in assessment criteria before mining is imposed or extended in their environments
3. These criteria should be applied at state level with appropriate Federal appeals processes for affected communities.

2. Higher rainfall agricultural areas – especially those nearer large population centres be identified as Australian Strategic Food Resources. Coal Mining will be excluded.

These areas will enable future food production meeting your criteria of:

- *Affordability*
- *Viability*
- *Sustainability*

3. NSW's recently announced 'renewable energy precincts' be linked with formally identified Regional Food Production Centres and be pursued with vigour.

This action will prevent coal mining in such areas and demonstrate the alternatives available. They will present true harmonious industrial coexistence opportunities and signal the extent of strategic change. Furthermore they will encourage high value environmentally sensitive industries in regional communities. Jobs of far greater value to Australia's long term future than mining jobs.

Now is the time to start.

Chris Russell

20th October 2009