

Submission to Inquiry into Food Production in Australia

To: Senate Select Committee on Agriculture and Related Industries

From: Janet Cox

Background

With my husband, I farm on the Haystack Plain, which is part of the Darling Downs in Queensland and currently threatened with mining. We are proud of our profession, and we are proud of our address. We feed the world, and we do it on one of the most inherently productive floodplains in the world. My husband is a fourth generation farmer of more than fifty years experience, and we have two adult sons, one of which is a qualified fitter and turner, who are also farmers. I also have a farming background through my mothers family although I grew up in cities. I have a background in banking, but sustainable production of healthy food is my pride.

We are graingrowers on some of the most inherently fertile and productive ground in Australia, and indeed the world.

As a farmer and committee member of the Haystack Road Coal Committee, a mother and grandmother, and a member of society I am deeply worried and concerned about the future of food production in this country and the impact it will have on all our descendants and the descendants of all the other mothers of the world.

Submission

The concept of food shortages to Australians is totally foreign as there has never been such a problem since early days when lack of knowledge of the nature of the land and how to farm it stood in our way. We have always been able to buy what ever we want and think nothing of throwing much good food away because it's 'past its use-by date'. While this is important from the health angle it tends to lead to great and unnecessary wastage and a mentality that there will always be more than enough.

The future of our food supplies relies very heavily on the decisions we make today.

We do not have the luxury of putting it in the too hard basket or ignoring it any longer and need to cherish our food producing country like no other thing. We have very skilled farmers who know their land and are there because of their affinity with the soil. These men and women daily do their best to produce more and more food off the same area of land through their desire to be able to do something good for mankind and feed not only fellow Australians, but to be able to pass on the surplus to the rest of the world.

Syngenta's Winter 2008 magazine *Gro* states that "Global grain stocks are now at their lowest level since 1982, with a meagre 50 days worth of grain storage around the world." And also that "Given the scale of the global food challenge, farmers in countries such as Australia will have to play a crucial role if we are to achieve success."

With statements like these we need to immediately cease the destruction of our prime agricultural areas like the Darling Downs of Queensland by the runaway behaviour of mining. These areas are highly productive and irreplaceable. Some of them, Haystack for example, produces vast amounts of food without the benefit of irrigation because of the nature of the soil and its water holding capacity and is a natural floodplain.

The issuing of mining licences over premium farming country shows a total disregard for the very basis of life – food. It shows a complete deficit of knowledge about what is required to produce food by the issuers of these licences and a 'happy go lucky' attitude that is behind the lack of foresight that seems to afflict the government in its greed to sell off Australia at any cost. It is also ridiculous to believe that once mined these areas can be restored to former productivity – we are only human.

With the massive explosions in population predicted world wide and right on our doorstep, we would be foolish to think we will be immune to the repercussions that this will bring if there is not enough to feed them. Sylvia Burwell from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation said recently, "We are at a watershed moment in world history where we will be united or divided depending on food policy and production" and "We will have world war or peace depending on our food policy and production."

We also owe it to society to do our best with regard to CO₂ emissions by not adding to the problem. By destroying our food producing country with the mining of coal we are not only starving ourselves out but also compounding the world's greenhouse gas emissions problems. While at the same time trying to produce food from less and less land, we are talking of using some of this land to produce trees to offset the ever increasing CO₂ problem. Agricultural science commentator, Julian Cribb states that "The precipitous fall in world food stocks in the past seven years is forewarning of what we can expect in the next few decades as civilisation runs low on water, arable land, nutrients and technology, as marine catches collapse, as biofuels grow and energy costs rise, and as droughts intensify under climate change." (December issue of the Australian Farm Journal)

Action must be taken now to protect our greatest asset, our very productive but very small areas of prime agricultural land. There is no way that we can retrieve this land once it is gone. We cannot do for land shortage what we have done for water shortage – desalinate or recycle sewage. We cannot create food credits if we run out of food as we do financial credits. It seems that the Government in its desperate attempt to balance the books is prepared to sell off everything without even knowing what it is they are selling, and let others worry about it later.

There are huge areas in this State where mining would have minimal impact and in fact be beneficial to the local economy, but leave our premium agricultural areas to continue producing for generations to come.

Summary

We need legislation to protect our prime agricultural areas and in the mean time we need moratoriums on the areas at present under threat while the mess that prevails is sorted.

Thanking you for your time in reading this article.

Janet Cox