



**Re: Need for urgent action to protect Australia's prime agricultural land**

We are writing to you requesting urgent action to protect key areas of Australia's prime agricultural land. As a member of the Australian Senate, you are in a unique position to ensure legislation to achieve this protection is enacted, particularly given the current Senate Inquiry into Australia's food security.

**Specifically we are requesting that key areas of nominated prime agricultural land be declared "National Assets", in order to afford them the protection they deserve given their key role in ensuring continued supply of high quality, healthy food for Australians.**

*By "prime agricultural land", we mean land which has high quality soils and sufficient rainfall and/or sustainable water sources other than direct rainfall for high production levels of quality animal and vegetable food items.*

We believe it is essential that Australian consumers continue to have reliable access to food whose origins and production history are known, and accord with the high health and other standards our consumers are used to (and expect).

Given the above, we are extremely concerned about the rate at which prime agricultural land is being taken out of production or degraded in Australia due in particular to mining impacts (direct and indirect) and encroachment by urban developments. In this regard we note:

- considerable legislative and educational initiatives/pressure at State and Federal levels in recent decades have led to big improvements in farming practices in Australia - these have made agriculture more environmentally sustainable, its products more healthy and its practitioners more accountable for their actions;
- conversely there has been less than equivalent pressure on the **mining industry** to adopt environmentally sustainable practices and be accountable for the longer term less obvious impacts of those practices; and
- seemingly sacrosanct "**urban sprawl**" continues to take valuable agricultural land out of production, especially on Australia's coastal fringe.

**It is therefore time for the Federal Parliament to take action to protect prime agricultural land from adverse mining impacts and urban encroachment, for the long term good of the Australian community.**

Federal Parliament is the appropriate forum for this to happen, given State Governments have demonstrated they are reluctant to act in relation to these matters, favouring short term opportunistic financial gain and "lip service" environmental actions ahead of longer term fiscal responsibility and credible, soundly based environmental policies respectively.

Whilst we recognise that Australia must trade internationally to exist economically in a global economy, food security (in terms of continuity of supply of Australian grown healthy produce), is very important from a national security viewpoint:

- preservation and responsible management of prime agricultural land is a key element to achieve this security;
- given that only around 6% of Australian land is arable, there is little room for complacency - this land type is a scarce resource that must be protected from inappropriate uses/ influences; and
- where this category of land sits over key water resources, the need to protect it from inappropriate use/influences (eg, pollution of underground water reserves from mining activities) is paramount.

Recent Federal Governments have demonstrated their resolve to address nationally important issues by their actions in relation to water resources management in the Murray-Darling Basin and protection of Australia's financial institutions in the light of the world-wide "financial meltdown". **It is time to take the lead again, on the issue of prime agricultural land use!**

A prime example of the prime agricultural land we are requesting protection for is the Liverpool Plains in Northern New South Wales:

- this area is a key contributor to the nation's food supplies, GDP and exports with crops yielding 40% above the national average year-on-year according to the government's own statistics; and
- its well-managed water supplies are in the upper reaches of the Murray Darling Basin, it has reliable summer and winter rains and exceptionally fertile volcanic soils which support a wide variety of crops and grazing operations, totalling over 1,000 enterprises.

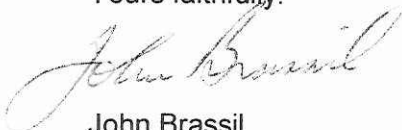
At present many landowners of this region are resisting attempts by BHP-Billiton to perform exploratory drilling for coal deposits on their properties, with the aim of undertaking long wall underground mining under those properties in due course:

- these landowners and many other concerned citizens, including ourselves, have grave concerns regarding the potential impacts of the proposed drilling/mining on the ground water supplies under the Liverpool Plains; and
- we therefore believe that drilling and mining activities by BHP-Billiton, or any other mining companies seeking minerals or gas, should not be allowed to proceed on the Liverpool Plains.

In conclusion, we believe that now is the time for you and your Senate colleagues to enshrine "National Asset" status for prime agricultural land in legislation, as part of the "Food Security Inquiry" outcomes or otherwise. The legislation should specifically prohibit other than approved agricultural activities on this category of land. The Liverpool Plains situation is a classic example of the issues in question that you should investigate to understand them in detail.

We would also appreciate a response to this letter indicating your views on this matter.

Yours faithfully.



John Brassil



Vicki Brassil

(sustainable practices farmers and concerned citizens)