

# Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Food Security in Australia

May 2009

## Overview

The senate committee inquiring into food security in Australia has been asked to consider the country's food production capacity considering three factors.

How can Australia produce food that is?

- A) Affordable to consumers
- B) Viable for production by farmers
- C) Of sustainable impact on the environment

My interest in food production is as a partner in an irrigation farm on the Liverpool Plains in New South Wales and I will largely contain my submission to addressing the three variables as they apply to irrigated farmers in our region.

## Submission

"The challenge for the coming generation of farmers is to double food production using only half to two thirds of the currently available water. This implies a 200 per cent gain in water use efficiency, across all irrigation crops in every country in the world - or else a massive switch to rain-fed agriculture, for which the land area does not exist. *Cribb, J (2008 p.4)*

Productive land and clean water are essential for food production. As elaborated by Cribb (2008 pp3, 4) both are in limited supply and decreasing, not just in Australia but in the world. For humans to continue to thrive on this planet, we have to show care and respect to the water and land on which we rely or face starvation on an unimaginable scale. We cannot achieve a '200 percent gain in water efficiency', when we allow inappropriate land use to waste and poison that water. Nor can we ignore the vital role that well managed irrigation has to play in producing food in the future.

The Liverpool Plains is highly productive agricultural land with fertile black soil, well managed and good quality aquifers, a moderate climate and a reasonable distance to major population centres. The agricultural output from this region is diverse, reliable and abundant. This area is natural plains country, with some native bush coverage, surrounded by hills providing a basin for capturing rainfall.

Irrigation has been used on the plains for several decades and has undergone major restructuring in the last few years with the recognition by state and federal governments and the landholders, of the need for better water management. Dwindling water supplies and degradation of water quality in the broader environment were caused by drought, poor management and over-allocation of water resources. In our area, this

meant an immediate one third cutback to irrigation licences, followed by years of negotiating a water sharing plan which could deliver a fair and equitable adjustment package. This plan was implemented in 2006 and will mean a further 'ramping down' of water allocations over the next decade. For farmers who invested in the infrastructure required to operate an irrigation farm and who wish to continue irrigating, it means finding ways of farming more efficiently through additional investment in modern irrigation technology and / or buying additional water. Farmers need to have security of tenure in order to have the confidence to plan for the future and continue to invest in new technology. Mining exploration licences, which place a blanket of uncertainty on a community for 5 years, cause delays in investment and planning decisions and lose valuable time in water conservation programs. After all the work that was done by the state government on a water sharing plan, it seems inconceivable that same government can 'sell out' the water in favour of coal and gas mining.

Assurances by governments and miners that farming and mining can harmoniously co-exist do not stand up to critical scrutiny. Reports, such as the one released by the NSW Department of Planning on the Southern Coalfields last year, clearly show the gaps in knowledge which exist on the impacts of long wall mining on groundwater, aquatic flora and fauna, swamps and subsidence. The report recommends 'Due to the current knowledge gaps, a precautionary approach should be applied to the approval of mining which might unacceptably impact highly-significant natural features. The approvals process should require a 'reverse onus of proof' from the mining company before any mining is permitted which might unacceptably impact highly significant natural features.'  
*Hebblewhite, B. et al (2008) p.122.* In light of the predicted global food crisis, what could be more highly significant than the land and water on the Liverpool Plains?

Australia's ability to produce surplus food, places it in a strong position to maintain affordable, viable and sustainable agricultural production in the future, providing appropriate land and water management planning is implemented. This planning includes a critical evaluation of the development process of mineral resources by governments, who hold the rights to sell them, and prioritising the health of the land, water, environment and people, over short term cash injections. It must also prohibit extractive industries from polluting and destroying highly productive agricultural land and water. These resources are much too precious to waste and that is exactly what mining will do to them.

The Senate has long history of investigating water issues starting with the 'Scrutiny of Pollution in the River Murray' in 1979 through to 'The Value of Water and Resource Usage' in the early 2000's culminating in the 'National Water Initiative' and the 'Murray Darling Basin Agreement'. These studies must surely demonstrate the need to be proactive in water strategies and not wait until the damage is done. The aquifers, creeks and rivers of the Liverpool Plains need good management **now** to continue to supply the quality and quantity of water needed for food production and to flow into the Murray Darling Basin.

References:

Cribb, J 2008 *The Coming Famine* Julian Cribb & Associates Discussion Paper, Canberra ACT

Hebblewhite, B., Galvin, J., Mackie, C., West R., & Collins, D. 2008 *Strategic Inquiry into Underground Coal Mining in the Southern Coalfield*, NSW Department of Planning, Sydney NSW

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NSW Government 1998, Dept of Land & Water Conservation, Environmental Protection Authority, NSW Agriculture, NSW Fisheries, National Parks and Wildlife Service *Securing Our Water Future*, NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation, Sydney NSW