My story is only one of many in the mid-Hunter Valley.

My Husband died in 1984 aged 51 years, I found myself embroiled in things that I had never dealt with before.

Firstly Energy Australia decided to put a double 35KVA line right across the property. The negotiations took a while, trying to make them understand that we did not want poles and wires near any house or in our farm land.

"Ashton" was a beautiful property possibly the best watered in our area.

The North and West boundaries were Bowman's Creek with the associated alluviums, Bowmans Creek had never dried up during droughts, irrigation was always possible from four holes due to the incredible aquifers underlying the Valley.

The southern boundary was the Hunter River with the associated black soils and Glennies Creek was our eastern boundary again, alluviums.

There had been five dairies on the property from the 1920's worked by five share farmer families.

There were also two maintenance men employed.

Gradually over the years these dairies were combined into one large diary and run in conjunction with beef cattle and hay production.

In 1986, I discovered an open cut mine had been granted consent to mine on the western boundary, no buffer zone was included in the consent.

From the commencement of mining in about 1988 the whole property was constantly engulfed in dust, both from blasting and draglines working 24 hours a day.

The noise from these operations kept the farmers awake at night as well as the large spotlight on the dragline swinging to and fro across the property. Living there became a nightmare.

The dairy herd would not eat the irrigated pasture at times especially after a blast or strong westerly winds. They would walk out of the paddock and try to find feed near the creek. It was during a very dry time and native pasture was very limited.

I employed an Agricultural Consultant to determine the herd feeding problem. His results showed excessive amounts of dust on that particular feed, barley (that has minute hair-like structure on the long leaves), which collected and held the dust. The herd developed coughs, which were quite audible after blasts and windy days.

The next problem was our lucerne growing along Bowman's Creek. It was showing stress and dying in areas.

I contacted the next door mine as we considered it had to be the constant dust. They brought a "lucerne expert" up from Victoria who walked through the paddock, kicking it with his boots and inspecting a plant or two at ground level. He said we had nematodes.

I asked to be shown these, producing a spade we had brought but he declined.

Very soon after his visit we discovered it was the water from Bowman's Creek.

The so-called "lucerne expert" I found out later was running a coffee shop with his wife? (He must have been a talented expert)!!!

A number of years previously Coal and Allied had been permitted to mine under Bowman's Creek about 8 kilometres upstream.

I was informed by a land holder upstream that the base of the creek had broken and the water was pouring direct into the underground mine.

It apparently was flowing through the tunnels picking up the heavy metals, then continuing down an aquifer, rising again as a spring approximately 2 kilometres down stream. This water then continued to flow down through the Ravensworth area and on through Ashton property and then into the Hunter River.

Water testing showed the water flowing into the mine was 300 ppm salinity and came out of the mine into the springs and aquifers at 1200 ppm (cut off salinity is 700 ppm for lucerne).

This water added contamination to the already contaminated river water due to the then SPCC (later EPA), which permitted two mines upstream to discharge 2 megalitres a day each into the river.

Our river pump was approximately 300 metres down from the convergence of the creek and river, consequently we took the full brunt of the contamination of the river water.

I had a Water Resources person to look at our problem and was told to purchase a water testing unit and only irrigate at less than a particular salinity level.

During a couple of very hot and dry summers, there were times that we could not irrigate due to high salinity levels. One January we were unable to use the water for twelve days.

I was forced to "dry off" half the herd as we could not provide the green feed necessary for milk production.

By this time we had had enough. The mine next door was contacted and acquisition was requested.

The share dairyman then left, he was working as hard as usual but the returns from his share were less than half that he had received previously due to the smaller herd and milk being rejected by the factory for dust contamination. The rejections occurred after very windy periods and blasting.

When a refrigerated vat is emptied, of the milk, under strict hygiene regulations the farmer must wash the vat using specific detergents, then must leave the lid open for a period to dry and eliminate any odour. This was the cause of the dust entering the vat.

I was able to employ a local retired couple to milk and another person to irrigate etc.

It took many very nasty and prolonged periods of negotiation with the mine personnel to reach a deal.

I was told that I was to keep the dairy running because they were going to prove that dairying and mining could co-exist.

I then had to borrow money to keep the dairy running until the company made the decision to purchase.

The whole deal was most unpleasant, my Lawyer stating that he could not believe the conduct of the mining personnel.

I finally sold to them in 1994. There was no compensation from the Government or the mining industry for loss of income over those years (which was considerable) or compensation for the loss of water quality.

During these difficult years, my manager, who had lived and worked on Ashton from the age of fourteen became ill. I believe it was the anger and

frustration he lived through during those years, watching the demise of a property he loved. He was proud of what he had achieved in his years of management. The pressure he was under progressed his health problems to the stage that an immediate quadruple by-pass was ordered.

He was unable to work after this, so part of the negotiations with the mine had to include a "super type" payment for him as he had always known he could retire on Ashton. Approximately 18-24 months later the mining company shut the dairy. (I was proven right!!!).

Mine is only one story of many stories from this area of the Hunter Valley. So many farmers were left with no water, or the water contamination was so bad it could not be used.

The area of land that has been laid waste by mining is large. Those mountains of blown-up rock rubble they call the rehabilitated land is toxic and no stock can graze.

The rocks contain the same heavy metals as the coal seams, which leach out during rain, contaminating the gullies and creeks and eventually entering the rivers.

These rubble mountains are unstable and will sink and move for hundreds if not thousands of years. The trees planted only grow very slowly and according to a study done about fifteen years ago will eventually collapse due to the lack of trace elements (these also leach out with rain).

The diverse and rich Hunter Valley is already under strain from contaminated water, land use is no longer predominately agricultural, 600 square kilometres of mining has been taken from agricultural use.

Communities and families have been uprooted and dispersed by the forced sale of properties and villages.

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If I had known in the early 1990's what I now know about water and dust contamination from coal I would certainly have had the dust and water regularly tested.

We were always being told that the dust was "inert" a favourite word from the miners.

Since the 1970's when the explosion of open cut mining commenced in this area, the health of the community has progressively deteriorated.

The problems showing are cancer and Type 1 Diabetes. Singleton region has one of the highest numbers of persons with cancer of any region in NSW and respiratory problems are extremely high, namely asthma, sinusitis, constant coughs and skin allergies, to name the most reported. Local GP's are extremely concerned at the number of prescriptions for puffers etc. that they are constantly prescribing.

Residents living out of town collect their rain water from their roof into tanks for drinking water. Many people are now unable to drink their water due to contamination from dust and power station fall out.

Tests taken from various tanks have shown high levels of lead and aluminium etc.

Requests have been made to mining companies to provide drinking water to those households affected but the response has been negative.

We are requesting a health study to be done in the Singleton Shire due to the Power Station fallout, dust and water contamination. The treatment by the NSW Government and various Government Departments and the Industry is a disgrace.

What is the most important for our planet coal or food? The planet is fast running out of food production.

Coal is dangerous both for those working in the industry, but more particularly, the fall out from the three power stations.

There are many studies from the USA and Europe describing the carcinogen nature of coal.

The Hunter Valley has always been known as a rich and diverse region with "mostly" reliable rainfall, due to our being close to the coast, and the shape of the Valley – storms and rain are "sucked up" from the Newcastle area. Scone is the Horse Capital of Australia – we have nearly all the top thoroughbred studs – a multi million dollar business. Many of these are threatening to leave the Valley due to the dust pollution and power station fallout.

This Valley can grow nearly all crops for human consumption, vegetables, fruit, grain, dairying, beef cattle, lambs, goats to name some of the produce.

We are close to markets. The food can always be fresh, this is, if we are to be allowed to produce "clean green" food without contamination.

We have the markets in S.E. Asia, we must be able to take advantage of these.

Agriculture in Australia can be on-going given the right conditions.