

Submission to Inquiry into the impacts of mining in the Murray Darling Basin

To: Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts

From:

Coralyn Ellis

Background

I am a farmer. I own land in the Haystack district on the Darling Downs in southern Queensland. I came to this district from southern New South Wales with my family just over 50 years ago when I was two years old.

I lived and worked in Toowoomba for approximately 10 years but I returned to the family properties around 20 years ago because of 'my love for the land'. My properties on and near Haystack Road are situated on a floodplain just kilometres from the Condamine River which is part of the Murray Darling Basin.

Submission

There are many people on this earth who know what food shortages are about – it is a daily dilemma for them. Australians have not known this and therefore it is hard for our population, including our leaders and politicians, to even contemplate what it would be like to be starving!

The last seven years have seen the world consume more grain than has been grown. This cannot go on – we need to grow more! Why would we ever consider destroying prime farming land when we need to grow more food? And then, there is the humanitarian side of this equation – shouldn't we look at that side as well? There are people in this world who cannot provide food for themselves and I believe that it is our responsibility to do our best to grow food to help these people.

The land on the Haystack Plain is highly productive and an inherent feature of it is that the soil structure (deep self-mulching black soil) holds soil moisture for much longer than most other soils and allows us to successfully grow dryland crops on a regular basis. I am sure that if we look after this land we will be able to continue to grow crops for a very long time –in fact for as long as people need food.

The farmers on Haystack Plain employ sustainable and coordinated management practices to best manage the floodplain on which they grow a variety of crops. Landcare has played an integral part in the development of management practices and in providing expertise to landholders to deal with floodplain flows and erosion.

This fertile land is just kilometres from the Condamine River – part of the Murray Darling Basin. It is a floodplain – water flows across the floodplain on its way to the

Condamine River. There has been so much money spent on trying to rectify major problems within the Murray Darling Basin because of, not only climate change but also, man's interference with the rivers and their floodplains. Have we learnt nothing? How could anyone believe that altering flood flows, etc in order to operate an open cut coal mine would be anything but environmental vandalism!

The area under Qld Mineral Development Licence 383 last year produced enough wheat to make 68 million loaves of bread, enough food grain to make beef for sausages to go around Australia 1.5 times, enough barley to make 7 million stubbies of beer and much more.

The claims that areas of land have been reclaimed following mining seem to me to be somewhat exaggerated. I have been driving through the mining area at Moura for the past 22 years to visit my sister who lives on a cattle property some distance from Baralaba. I have seen little to demonstrate that much reclamation has taken place. There are large soil heaps of overburden and deep pits of what I imagine is stagnant or worse still 'toxic' water. This land was once good grazing land - not prime farming land as is the case at Haystack. It appears that there would be a lot of 'trusting to luck' if we jeopardise the prime farming land at Haystack and other exceptional farming areas hoping that miraculously it will be reclaimed to its former highly fertile and productive state! I don't believe it is possible.

I believe that the Queensland Government has issued itself a licence on Haystack Road through its entity, Tarong Energy. Tarong Energy has stated that it has no intention of mining or using the coal from Haystack Road – they intend to sell the licence to the highest bidder and then collect the royalties from the coal when it is mined! A double windfall for the Queensland Government but at what cost?

Deputy Premier Lucas has stated that mining is temporary – but how can our area go on after mining if our prime farming land has been destroyed? What will be left? And we come back to the same question – who will grow the food?

Although I am deeply concerned that my own prime farming land is under threat, I also appreciate that there are several other areas of superior farming land in Queensland which are also under threat from mining. Only 2 percent of Queensland's land area is prime farming land – surely this area should be protected from mining.

Farmers have to follow strict guidelines as far as tree clearing, control of weeds, erosion control measures, water changes, etc. are concerned – these measures are meant to preserve this natural resource for future generations - surely these same strict guidelines should apply to everyone, including any mining operations.

We need our Federal and State Governments to rethink their policy on mining and look at the whole picture in a rational way – mining should not take precedence over prime farming land so that we can maintain our capability to grow crops for the benefit of all Australians.

In the past that there has been a misconception that farmers are not necessary and that we could import all our food. I believe this could only be a recipe for disaster and the message has to be spread that we need our farmers to help provide food for an ever increasing world population.

Summary

I have often heard the saying 'Australia is the lucky country' – if this is so, then I believe we have a moral obligation to protect prime farming land to enable food to be produced for as long as Australians and the rest of the world's population need to eat.

In as little as two decades when the windfall for Queensland's coffers from this prime farming land is coming to an end and coal is no longer an acceptable fuel source, will we stand condemned on the world theatre for our environmental destruction and greedy ways? This quality farming land and much more will not produce food any more. And will our children and society in general really think it was worth it?

An Australia-wide food production policy that protects prime farming land from mining is required. Also, a moratorium on mining or the issue of MDL's on premium farming land is required until the above policy can be implemented.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this submission.

Coralyn Ellis