growcom

together we grow

Submission to

The Senate Standing Committee on the Environment, Communications & the Arts Inquiry into the impacts of mining in the Murray Darling Basin

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About Growcom

Growcom is the peak representative body for the fruit and vegetable growing industry in Queensland, providing a range of advocacy, research and industry development services. We are the only organisation in Australia to deliver services across the entire horticulture industry to businesses and organisations of all commodities, sizes and regions, as well as to associated industries in the supply chain. We are constantly in contact with growers and other horticultural business operators. As a result, we are well aware of the outlook, expectations and practical needs of our industry.

The organisation was established in 1923 as a statutory body to represent and provide services to the fruit and vegetable growing industry. As a voluntary organisation since 2003, Growcom now has grower members throughout the state and works alongside other industry organisations, local producer associations and corporate members. To provide services and networks to growers, Growcom has about thirty-five staff located in Brisbane, Bundaberg, Ayr, Toowoomba and Tully. We are a member of a number of state and national industry organisations and use these networks to promote our members' interests and to work on issues of common interest.

Introduction

Growcom welcomes the opportunity to make a submission into the Senate Inquiry into the impacts of mining in the Murray Darling Basin.

Food security is increasingly becoming a worldwide concern, with an ever expanding world population and climate change adversely affecting the productivity and fertility of some agricultural land.

With Good Quality Agricultural Land (GQAL) comprising less than five per cent of Australia's total land mass[1], and our national population expected to reach 35 million by 2049,[2] Growcom has several reservations about any development on GQAL that would lead to decreased food production. As a part of the rural sector in Queensland, Growcom is concerned about any projects which would lead to net job losses in rural and regional communities. Growcom strongly promotes environmentally responsible and sustainable practices in farming and would be concerned at any activity that polluted ground or surface water or significantly increased the amount of water being taken from the Murray-Darling system.

[1] Agforce submission to this inquiry, p1.
[2] Third Intergenerational Report www.news.com.au/story/0,27574,26089820-421,00.html

Economics

The total gross value of horticulture produced in the Queensland section of the Murray Darling Basin in 2007/08 was $422.5 million.[3] A 2004 Survey found that 1,598 people were employed in the horticulture industry in this region.[4]

Whilst Growcom acknowledges that mining can also be a large economic contributor to a region, such operations are often less labour intensive, and have a definite lifespan. With the right land and water management practices, horticulture can continue to be undertaken indefinitely in the Murray Darling Basin.

The proposed coal mine and petrochemical plant at Felton near Toowoomba is a good example:

Felton

The total value of horticulture production in the Felton/Cambooya area is in excess of $23 million per year and employs 400 people.[5]

Horticultural produce in the Felton area includes:

- 750,000 lettuces per week
- 65,000 cauliflowers per week
- 18,000 cabbages per week
- 2,000 tonnes onions per year
- 500 tonnes potatoes per year [6]

The proposed mine and associated development will employ 600 people for 15 months to undertake construction, then reduce to 125 employees for ongoing operation.[7] This would leave the district with only 125 permanent jobs created, while 400 are threatened in horticulture alone and many more in other agricultural industries. At the end of the mine's life – approximately 30 years – these 125 jobs may also be lost to the region.

Water

Mining is a water intensive activity. The mine and petrochemical plant proposed for Felton will require 16,000 Megalitres of water per year. This is twice the annual water usage of the nearby City of Toowoomba.[8] State and Federal Governments have been working for some time to increase flows in the Murray Darling system. Drawing large amounts from water from either artesian or groundwater sources is likely to have a large negative impact on flows into the Murray Darling system from Southern Queensland.

[3] ABS research paper #7503
[4] Economic Contribution of Horticulture Industries to the Qld & Australian Economies, Nov 2004.
[5] Survey by Friends of Felton
[6] ibid
[7] Ambre Energy IAS p30
[8] Ambre Energy IAS

The use of large amounts of water by mining inevitably impacts on farmers both locally and downstream. If the water table drops due to water being taken at a greater rate than the aquifers replenish, then farmers will be forced to drill their bores deeper at considerable cost. With the horticultural and many other agricultural sectors being price takers, these farmers would be unable to recoup the expense from such an exercise, which may have to be repeated many times during the life of the mine.

Much of the ground water that is being brought to the surface as a by-product of mining in Southern Queensland has a high salt content. The results of this water leaching into the Murray Darling system would be disastrous in a River that already has a serious salinity problem.

The potential pollution of aquifers by mining is also a serious concern both for locals who rely on this water and for the Murray Darling as a whole, given that springs often run into creeks and rivers.

When floods occur in the Basin, mine tailings may be washed into the Murray-Darling tributaries. This occurred at several mines in North-West Queensland during the early 2009 floods, with the owners subsequently declaring bankruptcy and leaving insufficient funds for a clean-up.[9] The water in creeks downstream from these mines was not usable for any purpose for many weeks.

Rehabilitation

While rehabilitation of grazing land after it has been mined has met with reasonable success, the proposed method of rehabilitation for horticultural land near Felton - storing the topsoil and replacing it after the mining is complete – has never been tried before.[10] Replacing the mined coal under the topsoil with waste from the petrochemical plant presents a pollution hazard not just to artesian and surface water, but also a contamination risk to food grown in that topsoil.

The elevation and slope of fields are important determinants in the successful growing of crops. It is doubtful that the exact current growing conditions could be replicated once mining has ceased. Many farmers will have employed considerable money, time and effort in laser levelling and similar technology to achieve maximum production from their properties. It is unlikely that any rehabilitation of the land would be so detailed as to return the land to the exact slope and level as before.[11]

Air Pollution

Airborne waste from the mining has the potential to render many above-ground horticultural crops unfit for human consumption. For example, 750,000 lettuces produced per week in the Felton area could end up covered in coal dust.

[9] Agforce submission & ABC story
http://202.6.74.88/news/stories/2009/05/11/2566029.htm?site=westqld
[10] Submission from Howard Briggs, Australian Institute of Agricultural Science and Technology
[11] Comments from Rob McCreath, Friends of Felton, Growcom visit to Cambooya, 18/9/09.

Conclusion

For mining and horticulture to co-exist in an area, there needs to be more stringent regulations regarding the potential pollution of air and water. Reduction of flows in the Murray Darling system, through excessive demands on either groundwater or overland flows need to be minimised, and improved measures implemented to prevent mine waste ending up in the river system in the case of a flood. Any mining by-product of saline water must be quarantined to avoid damage to land or waterways.

A serious examination also needs to occur in the light of a rapidly expanding Australian and world population, as to whether precious water and decreasing amounts of Good Quality Agricultural Land should be allocated for use in the mining sector or to improve our food security.

The long-term jobs provided by mining and horticultural industries need to be examined also. Whilst the construction of a mine can bring a short, sharp boost to local employment and the economy, in the long run mining can often cause a net loss in local jobs.