

Why Galilee Basin Coal Must Stay in the Ground

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I was a Principal Research Scientist in CSIRO for 21 years, and led work on adaptation to sea level rise in Queensland, and coping with climate change in the Murray Darling Basin. I am now an Honorary Associate Professor at the ANU, and an Honorary Fellow of the Resilience Alliance. This submission is made from my environmental business, Catchment to Coast Consultants.

Human civilizations evolved during the last six thousand years, during which global climate has been benign for humans compared with preceding ice ages and hot periods. Societies assume current conditions are stable. In fact emissions from fossil fuels have brought the planet's climatic system precariously close to a tipping point beyond which carbon sinks become sources and cause runaway climate change (Steffen et al 2018). The expected global consequences are well documented in IPCC (2018). They include inundation of cities, densely populated floodplains and islands, intense hurricanes, increased frequency of droughts, floods, heatwaves and fires, crop failures, displacement of humans and health impacts, loss of species, damage to buildings and infrastructure and conflict. We are already beginning to experience some of these.

The of time left for us to reduce fossil fuel emissions and shift to renewable technologies is short and shrinking, so emissions must be reduced very rapidly (IPCC 2018). In these circumstances the Australian Government is, amid international astonishment, promoting the release of large additional emissions by allowing new coal mines to be opened in the Galilee Basin.

Proponents argue that opening mines in the Galilee Basin will boost the regional economy with new jobs. Adani's Carmichael mine would have provided less than 1500 direct jobs even before it was scaled back because no Australian or international financial institution would fund it. New coal mines would be automated from pit to port, and most employees would be highly skilled and fly-in-fly-out, probably drawn mostly from existing mines in New South Wales rather than unskilled and inexperienced regional workers. Compare this with the almost 70,000 jobs provided by the tourism in the Great Barrier Reef, which is already being destroyed by rising ocean temperatures, and the growing number of jobs created by the thriving Queensland renewable energy sector. New mines would moreover harm farmers and graziers through their impacts on groundwater and the Suttor River.

Opening new coal mines is nonsensical at a time when we know we must cut emissions and leave the coal in the ground, and renewable energy is already available. The CFMEU itself recognizes with its Just Transitions strategy. For the good of our planet, Australia and future generations, the Galilee Basin coal must stay in the ground.

References

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