


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

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

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Background

Although I now work in Victoria, I remain deeply connected with the Haystack Road area at the source of the Murray-Darling Basin, having grown up in the area – the same area that my grandfather's family first farmed after travelling from Victoria in search of better pastures.

My parents and two brothers remain very involved in the region – farming ecologically and with rare productivity, and also active among the vital social framework of the area.

Submission

In the Independent Sustainable Rivers Audit Group SRA Report, Murray Darling Basin (MDB) Rivers: Ecosystem Health Check, 2004-2007, the Condamine Valley river ecosystem was in moderate health – of the 23 valleys in the MDB, it was one of only 3 valley systems given a good or moderate health card. The Haystack Plain region drains into the Condamine River (at the source of the MDB), and this area has been licensed for mining by the Queensland Government; similarly, many productive areas surrounding this area are being drilled for such licences. Due to a lack of a rail line to plentiful coal stores in nearby, less productive soils, these alternative sources (which are slightly more costly in the short term) are being overlooked. (http://www.dme.qld.gov.au/zone_files/coal_files_pdf/qld_coal_map_08.pdf, http://www.dme.qld.gov.au/zone_files/coal_files_pdf/se_qld_coal_map_08.pdf)

The Haystack Plain has a unique slope of only 0.02%, allowing the fertile soil to soak with rain and promote the highly productive crops of the area. Only 5% of Australia's land is arable and it is recognised that this area is among the most productive of that limited portion – due to soil structure, topography, and climate. It is obvious that this ecosystem needs to be preserved and maintained – mining through the Haystack Plain (regardless of rehabilitation efforts) will certainly disrupt the topography and thus productivity of the region, the health of the Condamine Valley ecosystem, and the entire Murray Darling River system which flows downstream of this area.

The soil, topography and climate of the Haystack Plains makes the area a particularly valuable cropping region which does not require irrigation. The region is home to a Landcare group that has won national awards for sustainability, and community and catchment planning, as well as progressive individuals who have won Queensland

Landcare Primary Producers Award, and Australian Cottongrower of the Year Award (even without irrigation). The combination of valuable land, and communities motivated towards natural resource management allows the source of the MDB to be well maintained and protected, while ensuring impressive agricultural productivity is maintained – especially while other cropping areas of Australia are suffering. The United Nations reported last year that to provide food for the world's growing population over the next 50 years, the world is going to have to produce as much as it has in the past 10 000 years – for this reason we need to sustain and promote productive areas such as the Haystack Plain.

Regardless of Mining Industry and EPA efforts to prevent accidents, mistakes do happen, as per the river flowing with baby-blue paint-like water with a pH of 3.3 downstream of Lady Annie Mine (<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/news/queensland/blue-mine-booboo-has-farmers-seeing-red/2009/03/23/1237656821706.html>). Mistakes like this through the MDB are possible, and would devastate the entire downstream ecosystem, and those who depend upon it, permanently.

Coal seam gas projects are underway in the Condamine Valley, and freely available development guidelines describe the storage of massive amounts of salty water from 300-500 metres below the earth's surface in dams lined with 50cm of compacted clay (http://www.arrowenergy.com.au/icms_docs/32829_Coal_seam_gas_development_guidelines_110808.pdf). There are no plans to repair the damage likely to occur with freak weather conditions over the number of decades the saline water will require to evaporate (when the natural resources and mining companies are long gone), nor the unforeseen problems bound to occur with such unprecedented aquifer insult. It is well recognised in these areas that dam walls can break, causing large losses of water, and they can seep – into upper aquifers and above ground water-ways, and ultimately into the MBD, worsening already well-recognised salinity issues.

While the government prioritises jobs and economic benefits, environmental impact statements are being passed without waiting for more environmentally suitable alternatives for this salty byproduct (<http://4350water.blogspot.com/2009/08/gladstone-ldp-plants-demand-for-csg.html>); similarly, coal mines are being approved before CO2 sequestration and land rehabilitation is remotely demonstrable. These valuable resources (coal and CSG) will still be underground when a safer manner for utilising them will be available, ensuring the protection of the MDB.

As the Mineral Council of Australia notes, the definition of sustainable development is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (<http://www.minerals.org.au/enduringvalue/> ; Our Common Future, Brundtland 1987). If this is not purely rhetoric, perspective should be applied and mindful legislation pursued, allowing water, food and clean energy to be spared for future generations.

Summary

The health and viability of the Murray-Darling Basin depends upon responsible land

use into the future. The Haystack Plain region promotes sustainable, productive agricultural industries motivated towards protecting the source of the Murray-Darling for the longevity of its future communities. Mining industries are motivated by short-lived profits alone, by the very nature of their limited resource; while their industry is yet to prove its environmental credentials, they should not be allowed to experiment with the health of our country's water into future centuries and beyond.