

Fears for future of agriculture

Food Security

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SPECIAL REPORT

A BATTLE is looming over the Hunter Valley's water resources and farming future, with coal companies seeking approval to mine riverlands previously regarded by many as off limits.

The Hunter Valley Water Users Association, the NSW Farmers Association and Hunter Minewatch are worried the government might approve potentially risky proposals without proper consideration.

At its state conference last month, the farmers association passed a resolution calling on the government to freeze consideration of any open-cut mining proposals on alluvial floodplains, and any longwall proposals within 150 metres of a creek.

The association wants the same limits to apply to coal seam gas extraction.

It wants the government to lift water security considerations out of Labor's controversial 3A planning laws, enabling the Office of Water to insist on better safeguards for rivers and underground water resources.

Some mines have already cut into riverine alluvium, the water-rich ground that forms an invisible, but integral part of streams and rivers, and are being forced to deal with water from the damaged streams entering their pits.

A spokesman for planning minister Tony Kelly said the farmers' association's views would be "carefully considered", but ruled out the requested freeze, saying the government was obliged to consider projects lodged under the environmental planning and assessment act. "The Department of Plan-

ning will work closely with the Department of Industry and Investment and the NSW Office of Water in developing the coal-mining strategy," the spokesman said.

The department was "well aware of the relevance of water resource issues to the projects" and "has required that these issues be thoroughly addressed by the proponents".

Two companies with proposals to mine near rivers, Coal & Allied and Ashton Coal, have said they are confident their plans address any environmental risks.

Hunter Valley Water Users Association president Arthur Burns said his organisation wanted the government to put all mining proposals close to rivers and streams on hold until its promised "whole-of-government" review of the relationship between mining and other land uses was done.

"After the Bickham refusal we were promised a new deal by the government in which all land uses would be fairly considered," Mr Burns said.

"But after the government released its air quality study at Camberwell, the planning minister said it would now be possible for consideration of mining proposals around Camberwell to progress.

"That comment has made a lot of us very nervous because there are real fears about the potential risk to waterways from some mining plans," he said.

Association vice-president Bruce Russell said he believed a handful of mining proposals

for alluvial land were "the thin end of the wedge".

"Other coal companies are watching with interest, and if the government opens the door, we could be about to witness the beginning of the end of agriculture in the Hunter Valley," Mr Russell said. "This issue makes the fuss over Bickham a tiny matter by comparison."

Mr Russell's wife and former association secretary Carol Russell said the Hunter's rivers, streams and aquifers were suffering "death by a thousand cuts".

"On their own some of these mines might be OK, but all together the impact is devastating," she said.

Mrs Russell said water from Glennies Creek alluvium had been leaking into the Ashton mine near Camberwell.

Ashton had been obliged to buy water allocations to cover the losses caused by its mine, but this was subverting the real intent of the water-sharing scheme, she said.

"Under the water-sharing scheme, that lost water belonged to existing users or the environment.

"Now we understand some coal companies are talking about buying allocations to cover damage they expect to do in the future. That is turning the whole intent of the scheme on its head. You shouldn't be allowed to buy a licence to cause a problem," she said.

"The legislation was enacted to minimise waste of water and harm to river systems, not to underwrite bad mining practice."

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GRAVE CONCERN: Hunter Valley Water Users Association vice-president Bruce Russell on his farm at Mount Thorley near Singleton.

- Picture by Peter Stoop

GROWING: The open-cut mine at Camberwell and the village of Camberwell behind it.

