

Water Wars 2020

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Agriculture and Mining make a big contribution towards our export earnings. There is increasing competition in Australia between rural communities and mining for water and land resources. Surface water and especially groundwater is precious and there is a price to pay under our current regulations, both in the short term and the long term. There is an economic price to pay in the short term and ecological price in the long term. This has led to a bidding war for water and land.

There are many new coal mines and extensions to existing mines and coal seam gas projects undergoing the process of approval right now. Rural communities are understandably very concerned by these proposals that pose a high risk to their water supplies, for town drinking water, irrigation and stock and domestic productive use.

Mapping the underground bedrock landscape should have a high priority before mining goes ahead. In some valleys like the Upper Namoi Valley this has already been done. The findings should be considered front and centre of the assessment process. The battle between science and politics is ongoing and the future of our children in terms of 'intergenerational equity' is at stake.

Unprecedented drought, bushfires and hailstorms heralded in the new decade. It is obvious to most people in Australia that an age of extreme weather events and climate change has arrived. For the irrigation and water sectors, these climatic challenges add to those of policy development and implementation at state and federal level. This has brought us to the price war we see today in securing our scarce natural resources for productive use. Water goes to the highest bidder.

From the Galilee Basin in north Queensland to the Gunnedah Basin and Hunter Valley in New South Wales, we see rural communities and mining interests at war contesting access to water and land. The stage is set in 2020 for many valleys in Australia to decide what they want. The question is; do we need more new coal mines and coal seam gas proposals at the expense of access to surface water and groundwater? Fossil fuel or water: rural communities must choose.

The cumulative risk of large-scale coal mines and coal seam gas proposals is placing rural communities under threat in terms of social, environmental and economic outcomes. The risk to surface/groundwater supplies and their sustainable use is extremely high. Is there a solution to the problem facing rural communities right now?

Can there be peace in the valley?

I believe that agriculture and mining can co-exist if there is mutual understanding and respect. Understanding surface water and groundwater in the real catchments of valleys is paramount. Hydrology and hydrogeological field studies are the key and political expediency must be put to one side.

The science must be presented to assure the catchment communities that their voice will be heard and transparency and accountability in the assessment process will be adhered to. Prime agricultural floodplain land must not be crossed with mining infrastructure. Longwall coal mining should not be allowed under the plains.

Large open cut mines should not be allowed in the aquifer recharge areas of the sideslope catchment. Aquifer interference through run-off and deep drainage recharge should be assessed in all new proposals including extensions to approved mines. Groundwater is as precious as buried treasure so we should value it.

Eyewitness accounts of flooding in the valleys must be listened to and acted upon. Built infrastructure on our dynamic floodplains should always be closely examined. The 'precautionary principle' should always apply.

Judgment day in the valley of decision

There is a very relevant case study in the Upper Namoi Valley involving the Vickery Extension Project. It is in the process of assessment right now. The Project, which is really a new mine application, includes the construction of a Coal Handling and Preparation Plant (CHPP), a train load-out facility and a spur rail line across the Liverpool Plains. It will take coal across the Namoi River and the river floodplain to Emerald Hill where it will join the Mungindi to Werris Creek railway then to Newcastle.

If approved, this spur rail line will take coal from a number of mines across the river to create a mega mine. This will not do. The plains communities of Boggabri, Gulligal and Emerald Hill are understandably upset. They have been dealing with this threat to their livelihoods and families for over two years. Together with the unprecedented drought the strain is almost too much for the people of the Liverpool Plains.

There has been a complete lack of empathy from the coal mine and a refusal to listen to the science of the catchment above and below ground. Instead they have relied on transient numerical models to predict future flood heights. This is completely unacceptable and, in my opinion, the Vickery Extension Project should not be given 'development consent'.

Furthermore, in these days of extreme weather events and climate change great care should be taken in examining this Project. The safer option for all concerned is to keep off the floodplain and use the alternative access already approved. In this manner the Namoi River and its floodplain will remain connected. The ecology of the river and its floodplain will be preserved in accordance with long-term planning principles.



Part of the northern area of the Liverpool Plains. Photo source Ken Crawford 1991. Black soil plains overlying quality alluvial groundwater. Emerald Hill in background.

Unintended consequences during flooding will lead to breaches of the Water Act 1912 due to illegal diversion of water. The water spreading principles in the Water Management Act 2000 will attract a non-compliance order if the spur rail line goes ahead. Prime Agricultural Land (PAL) of national significance makes this an 'exclusion zone' for mining and mining infrastructure.

The black soil plains will be farmed for thousands of years if we care for them and I really care for them. The Vickery Extension Project is said to last just 25 years, which raises the question of 'intergenerational equity'. What will we tell our children and grandchildren if we allow the northern end of the Liverpool Plains to be compromised, in terms of land and water? And I will remember the land!

The compromise is that mining should be allowed to continue under the terms of the 2014 approval for the Vickery Coal Mine. The Blue Vale road access to the existing coal loader in Gunnedah using the already approved Kamilaroi Highway overpass is a solution to Vickery's problems and the protection of the Namoi River floodplain.

The Independent Planning Commission (IPC) will make the determination whether or not to give 'development consent'. If the politicians keep out of the multi-stage process the science will prevail. The IPC should be allowed to finish its work without interference. This will assure the people who live and work on the plains that their voice will be heard and that the process is transparent and accountable.

References and further reading

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