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Mining and farming: how and why they can coexist

One of the misconceptions in the current debate about mining, exploration and farming is that the existence of one negates the other. This is not, and should never be, the case. Mining and farming have coexisted in NSW for well over 100 years.

Both these primary industries share a great deal in common. We both continue to evolve and develop techniques and technologies for improving performance in our sectors, for managing and mitigating our environmental impacts and for adding value to the natural resources with which Australia is endowed. Our local communities are integral to our success.

An overriding need shared by both sectors is to continue to develop effective systems to make our industries sustainable and to bring a balanced approach to harnessing our natural resources.

Like farmers, miners work the land delivering essential products that every person in Australia needs and values: some of the best produce in the world, some of the most competitively priced coal-fired electricity in the world and metals that are used for our fences, houses, off and on-road vehicles and equipment, mobile phones, leisure and sporting goods.

The mining industry is a strong ally of the farm sector on some of the key issues facing primary producers like the need for adequate road, rail, power, water and telecommunications infrastructure in regional NSW.

Understanding our shared relationship to the land in the regions we both operate in is crucial when we consider somewhere like the Gunnedah Basin. It is a prosperous and productive corner of our state. On the surface, the region boasts rich, dark alluvial soils which support diverse land uses including wheat, sorghum, barley, maize and sunflowers as well as cattle, sheep and pigs.

The Gunnedah Basin is also home to one of the largest underground coal seams in New South Wales, stretching from Wollongong to Narrabri.

The first colliery opened in Gunnedah in 1900 and the Basin contains nearly 40 per cent of NSW's coal reserves – more than 30 billion tonnes. The region has the potential to enjoy the benefits of significant investment in minerals exploration and operations for most of the 21st century.

Both sectors are clearly essential and there are numerous examples throughout NSW which demonstrate how mining and other land users happily coexist for mutual and wider community

benefit. Indeed it is widely recognised that whole towns and regions have been rejuvenated through mining – Orange and its gold mining operations is a classic example.

In the Upper Hunter, the Beltana mine operates directly underneath operational vineyards – the first and only mine in Australia to do so. When mining began under the first vineyard in 2005 it was supported by one of the most extensive impact monitoring programs ever undertaken – assessing numerous factors including subsidence, water drainage and soil quality.

The world class monitoring program has provided huge benefits for the vineyard owners. New technologies, including satellite imaging, have been introduced to the wider Hunter Valley and vineyard owners have obtained valuable information about the viability of the businesses, even leading to changes in the types of grapes grown and where different grape varieties should be planted to maximize quality and yields. This information has been shared with vineyards outside of the mining area.

In the NSW Central Ranges, Ulan coal mine's Bobadeen irrigation scheme is a unique solution to water management that uses surplus mine water to irrigate 242 hectares of land specially planted with perennial pastures. Surplus mine water is first pumped to a holding dam and then to five-centre pivot irrigators. The pasture is kept at an optimal level by carefully monitored rotational grazing by beef cattle and the production of fodder.

An industry first, this scheme has been heralded as an outstanding and truly sustainable solution to a complex water management problem.

Mining in NSW is unique because we are mining on top of, next to and underneath multiple alternative land uses. The industry therefore takes very seriously its responsibility to listen to and respond to community concerns. Let's not forget that miners and their families live in these communities too.

The very fact that mines in NSW are so close to centres of population means that the benefits to the local community are immediate and immense. Vital jobs and economic wealth to regional communities enables other businesses (including agriculture) to prosper. Throughout our State, coal mining is a significant employer. There are 14,000 people directly employed in coal and around 60,000 people employed indirectly. Regional communities throughout NSW benefit from the expanded range of services which a long term mining operation brings with it.

Mining and farming in the Gunnedah region can and indeed should co-exist – most importantly for the long term future benefit of the local community. A diverse regional economy means more employment opportunities, more opportunities for young people to stay living locally. It also means more extensive government services, expanded recreational and cultural facilities, more housing stock, business investment and a “vibrancy” that towns like Wollongong, Newcastle, Orange, Singleton and Lithgow have long enjoyed.

Mining is a vital part of our economic future. Co-operation and mutual benefit must remain the reality of our co-existence for the next 100 years as it has been for the last 100 years.

