



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Mining impact on Liverpool Plains groundwater raised by Windsor in Parliament

The impact of long wall mining on the groundwater systems of the Liverpool Plains and broader Namoi Valley has been raised in the Federal Parliament by the Independent Member for New England, Tony Windsor.

Mr Windsor has long been calling for an Independent study of the impact not only in the immediate vicinity of mining but also further downstream in aquifers connected to those that could be directly affected.

He again called on the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts to take a stand and not leave it to the New South Wales government.

The Independent Member for New England told the Parliament:

“There is another issue I would like to raise if I could. I know this is a little outside the bill, but I think this is an opportune time to raise this issue. There is currently a lot of talk about climate change in the Murray-Darling system.

“We have just had the Prime Minister and the minister at the lower lakes of the Murray talking about the difficulties that are currently there. I think we all recognise those difficulties, though people have different views on how we solve some of them.

“One of the things both the Prime Minister and the minister said while they were there—I am verballing them a little bit, but this was the intent of their words—was that there had been mistakes in previous government policy—meaning the overallocation of water and the lack of recognition of what parts of our landscape could sustain in terms of land clearing and the application of water—which had led to this crisis in the Murray. They also say that the drought and climate change have been part of the problem in the Murray-Darling.

“There are a couple of issues I would like to raise there, and one of them is pertinent to my electorate at the moment. We currently have exploration licences being issued to major companies—BHP is one of them and a Chinese company is another one—to explore for coal on the Liverpool Plains, which is part of my electorate. Most people would be aware that the Liverpool Plains is probably some of the most productive land in the world, not just Australia.

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“I guess people can buy and sell land and do what they like with it, but that land is underpinned by something like 20 interconnected groundwater systems that have a relationship which we are not certain of with the river system, which happens to be the Murray-Darling system.

“We currently have a planning process for developing a coalmine that is state based and very much centred on localised impact. I am not opposed to coalmines; I have one literally next door to me. There is a coalmine within a kilometre of my bedroom window. But for the Prime Minister and the Minister for Climate Change and Water to say, at the bottom end of the Murray system, that past policy mistakes have caused a crisis in the Murray-Darling and then to refuse an independent study of the potential impacts of longwall coalmining—not only in highly productive food producing areas but in areas underpinned by interconnected groundwater systems that we have no knowledge of—is hypocritical.

“To allow the states to maintain that sort of mentality is, in my view, hypocritical. It is totally hypocritical to blame previous policy for a problem and then allow an existing policy potentially to exacerbate the same problem.

“There is no knowledge—whether it be in BHP, China or the United States—of what would happen to the Murray-Darling system if you slashed the artery of a longwall mine and interfered with the hydraulics of the interconnected groundwater systems that relate to it.

“Some would say: ‘You can give up just one valley. The Namoi Valley is only 250 kilometres long; who cares?’ There are six valleys in New South Wales and there are groundwater systems in the other states as well. They are something that we need to know about before governments allow exploration or mining in these areas.

“BHP recently said, ‘We are going to shrink the area we are looking at mining in so that we do not incorporate those groundwater systems or the flat, black Liverpool Plains soils.’

“That is all very well for them to say, but that does not stop them making application in the future to mine in those areas.

“I call on the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts to take a stand and not to leave it to the New South Wales government.

“It might be that all the State government is interested in is getting some cash for the exploration licences, but if we are serious about the Murray-Darling, climate change, coalmining into the future and sustainability of food bowls and production we have to have more knowledge of these groundwater systems and their interconnectivity; otherwise, we run the risk of looking back in 50 years time and saying: ‘Why didn’t they do something about that issue? Why, when they recognised at the time that there was a crisis in the Murray-Darling system, did they take the short-term cash option and destroy an interrelated system of highly productive groundwater aquifers?’”