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CLASH OF OUR ROOTS FARMERS v MINERS

Miners reap ill winds

Out on the Liverpool Plains, coal and gas companies are caught in a groundswell of agrarian revolution, writes **Marian Wilkinson.**

Barrelling down the highway from Gunnedah, past fields of sunflowers and sorghum, Tim Duddy pulls off his tie and lets out a loud cackle. He was recounting the day he was branded a ratbag by the pugnacious NSW Minister for Mines, Ian Macdonald.

Duddy had organised 150 locals to blockade his family property against a posse of engineers hired by BHP-Billiton to search for coal. Macdonald had sold a huge coal exploration licence to BHP for \$99 million over the rich black soils of the Liverpool Plains – including the south end of Duddy's farm, Rossmar Park.

Tony Windsor, the independent federal MP for New England, called Duddy to offer his support and laughed at the "ratbag" label. "Macdonald's got your measure!"

A few weeks after the blockade, Macdonald upped the ante, announcing the Labor Government was selling a second exploration licence, to the Chinese coal company Shenhua, for \$300 million. This one covered the other end of the Duddy farm near Caroonna.

In July, Macdonald had no idea just how much of a ratbag Tim Duddy can

be. "My great-grandmother pulled a gun on Thunderbolt and shot him in the leg," says Duddy, proudly trumpeting his feisty roots.

As local folklore has it, the bush-ranger cried out, "Jesus, that's a big gun, Missus." "Yes," she replied. "It's got two barrels. One for you and one for your mate."

Nine months since the blockade began, Duddy's skirmish with Macdonald and BHP has escalated into open revolt on the Liverpool Plains by a group of farmers against the mining companies – BHP, Shenhua, and Santos, which is exploring for coal seam gas.

Here, the land-use clash of Australia's great primary industries – farming and mining – has come to a head. Its outcome will influence whether mining continues to enjoy often unfettered exploration access. The battle will test views of our history. Did Australia really ride on the sheep's back, or was it dug out of the economic privations of its penal settlement origins?

Macdonald's portfolio covers agriculture, energy and minerals. His decision to open up some of the richest farmland in the state to coal and energy companies is igniting a national debate over whether the country's prime agricultural land and water sources should be protected by law from the miners' reach.

Last week, Liberal senator Bill Heffernan led to Gunnedah a committee inquiring into the nation's food production. After a visit to the blockade at Rossmar farm, the senators met Duddy's mother, Patricia, 70. "You know we have been there for nine months," she told them. "This is not a casual thing that people of our

age, with our interests, are prepared to undertake."

The landowners meeting the senators were not, as one put it, "busted-arse farmers". They are educated, articulate and financially comfortable. Former NSW Supreme Court judge Bob Hunter told the senators bluntly that scarce prime agricultural land was under serious threat from the mining industry and "nowhere is that more acutely felt than in the [coal-rich] Liverpool Plains".

Just months ago, the farmers could raise few political allies outside the Greens and independents. Now it is drawing in the National Party, even some Liberals.

"Ian Macdonald can only blame himself," says Duncan Gay, the NSW Nationals spokesman on mining and agriculture. "I do believe we have to look at proper changes to the [NSW] Mining Act to make sure that we safeguard water and, in particular, if there are areas that can be described as iconic land, to protect those too."

Political pressure on Macdonald and the Nationals will increase next week when the NSW Greens call for a vote on their bill to stop mining on the state's prime farmland or within a kilometre of rivers and aquifers that feed it. Gay, a fourth-generation farmer, is feeling the pressure. The Greens' legislation, he says, is designed to wedge the major parties and might be "a step too far".

The Greens leader, Lee Rhiannon, knows her bill is unlikely to win over the Opposition but insists the Nationals won't come up with the goods unless pressure is kept on them.

Late last year, in league with



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Windsor, the federal Greens leader, Bob Brown, called on the federal Nationals to amend the Water Act to protect Liverpool Plains farmers. After some intense lobbying by the mining industry, Brown says, the amendment was significantly weakened.

Action in the Mining Warden's court to block BHP access to four properties failed last week.

Macdonald and the miners insist coexistence of mining and agriculture is supported by most locals. A BHP mine, Macdonald says, could be worth \$2 billion.

Macdonald cancelled an interview with the *Herald* this week and instead sent a lengthy email listing the benefits of mining and encouraging landholders, the community and companies "to work together cooperatively to facilitate the accumulation of sound geological and environmental data during the exploration phase of this project".

BHP and Macdonald say the impact of mining will be minimised. BHP has repeatedly denied consideration of long wall (extensive horizontal) mining under the floodplain or deep aquifers. Nor will it do open cut mining. It has reduced to 150 square kilometres its exploration area and shifted from the floodplain to the hills.

But central to farmers' complaints is Macdonald's only recent agreement to a comprehensive study of the region's unique groundwater systems, including the Namoi catchment that feeds into the Murray

Darling Basin. That study is unlikely to be finished before BHP's exploration. "The inquiry should have been done first and paid for by the Government so it was seen to be independent," says Gay.

Anger was on vivid display at Blackville last week when Santos wheeled out its staff for a community consultation night and barbecue. Just after 5pm, local women from SOS Liverpool Plains arrived in force, some with husbands and children in tow, demanding to run the meeting. "We want answers and we want them now," shouted one before arguments broke out among locals, and the Santos team walked out. It took 15 minutes to work out an uneasy truce allowing the Santos community liaison officer, Kath Logan, to take the stage.

But despite Santos's confident assurances, few in the hall were impressed by the PowerPoint presentations. Rosemary Nankivell, an SOS leader, complained that one photograph was sanitised. "Where are the sump ponds and waste ponds?" she demanded.

Logan's explanation that Santos was only exploring and would not extract gas for years did not appease the women. After two hours, the gulf between Santos and many locals was as wide as the plains themselves.

Groundwater pressure traps gas in coal. Unleashed, it releases not only gas but huge volumes of water, often heavy in salt and other contaminants.

This week the Queensland Government recognised coal seam water as a major environmental problem. It found Queensland's main gas sites were likely to produce 25 gigalitres of coal seam water a year for the next 25 years – enough to fill Sydney Harbour, and then some.

Santos announced a "ground-breaking solution" to its Queensland problem, proposing to plant 2 million gum trees irrigated by the coal seam water. The plantation, the company said, would be visible from space, but few in the Blackville hall were impressed. "It looks like pollution management rather than ... growing trees with" seam water, said a local water expert, John Clements.

At the Nankivell farm the next morning, SOS women were still angry at Santos's attempts to allay their concerns about potential damage to Plains groundwater. Margie Wilmott, a cattle and grain farmer, said local expertise far outweighed the Santos knowledge. "I saw the wealth of experience that [locals] had; we're talking about generations."

The SOS women have written to every state and federal MP seeking protection from mining. Like Duddy, they are unswayed by miners' detailed explanations and Macdonald's attempts at persuading them mining will bring jobs and wealth to their community, not damage to their farms. Wilmott says: "They have everything to gain. We have nothing to gain. We have everything to lose."

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Revolt ... Rosemary Nankivell, with sorghum and dog. Wanting answers now. Photo: Ben Rushton

