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# Anti-mining bill defeated

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The NSW Labor government has narrowly defeated a Greens bill to stop mining activity on prime agricultural land that would have halted projects such as BHP-Billiton's Carooona development, which is now mired in a grassroots campaign being waged by local farmers.

The Greens joined forces with the opposition, giving it a chance of passing the bill with the support of either of the crossbench groups.

But Labor won the support of Christian Democrat Fred Nile and two Shooters Party MPs in the upper house last night, defeating the Greens bill 20 to 19.

The bill would have also banned mining and exploration within a kilometre of rivers and aquifers that feed prime farmland.

"Prime agricultural land and water in NSW's food bowl is being sacrificed for the profits of multibillion-dollar mining companies like BHP Billiton, with the nod of the Rees government," Greens upper house MP Lee Rhiannon said.

"This vote will not kill off the campaign to protect our best food-producing land. Local farming communities and the Greens will now redouble our efforts to protect these rich, productive soils from mining."

The government has been seeking to develop mining in the Gunnedah basin, granting BHP-Billiton the Carooona licence for \$123 million and accepting more than \$600 million from the Chinese government-owned power company Shenhua to explore the Watermark tenement.

It is also selling an additional 11 licences containing smaller amounts of coal.

Primary Industries and Mineral Resources minister Ian Macdonald said the bill would have destroyed mining in NSW, affecting economic growth and jobs.

The Nationals decided to block the bill after being "inundated" with complaints from farmers.

"This is not about a blanket ban on mining - it's about recognising the importance of mining to the economy and the importance of agriculture to the long-term sustainability of our nation," National Party frontbencher Duncan Gay said.

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The opposition accused the government of foul play in trying to use the death of two Australian troops in Afghanistan in March to move a condolence motion that would have adjourned yesterday's debate.

A group of farmers in the Liverpool Plains have caused the government and BHP-Billiton a major headache since August, blockading drilling activity despite lucrative exploration licences sold by the government to mining companies.

Caption: PHOTO: The protests outside parliament yesterday. Photo: NICK MOIR

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