



press clip

■ FARMERS v MINERS

Land use war: two tribes dig in

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Environment Editor

HUNDREDS of farmers last night vowed to continue their campaign to prevent mining operations on the state's prime agricultural land despite losing a key political battle yesterday in the NSW Parliament.

It was an emotional day for many farmers who came from the Liverpool Plains and the Hunter Valley to demonstrate their support for a bill to preserve high-quality farmland and water sources from mining.

The bill was introduced by the Greens and supported by the Opposition after the state National Party and the NSW Farmers Association threw their weight behind it.

But the bill was defeated after the Reverend Fred Nile joined forces with the Government in the upper house to oppose it. Angry farmers shouted "Shame! shame!" and walked out of the public gallery during Mr Nile's speech.

"It is very sad for the people of NSW that blind political prejudice will prevent the protection of the state's food production,"

said one farmer, Tim Duddy, last night after the defeat.

Mr Duddy blockaded his family farm south of Gunnedah against BHP-Billiton last year after the company attempted to search for coal there.

The Minister for Mining, Ian Macdonald, who granted the exploration licence, approved a second exploration lease in the area last year to the Chinese company Shenhua, which also covered part of Mr Duddy's farm.

"We will continue our fight, this is not over," Mr Duddy vowed last night.

The Coalition joined forces with the Greens in the first significant attempt to change the law to limit mining operations on prime agricultural land.

"The NSW Nationals have always supported the principal of protecting the state's iconic farmland," the party's leader, Andrew Stoner, said.

"The agriculture versus mining debate has long been a contentious issue and it's imperative that we strike a sensible balance between the two."

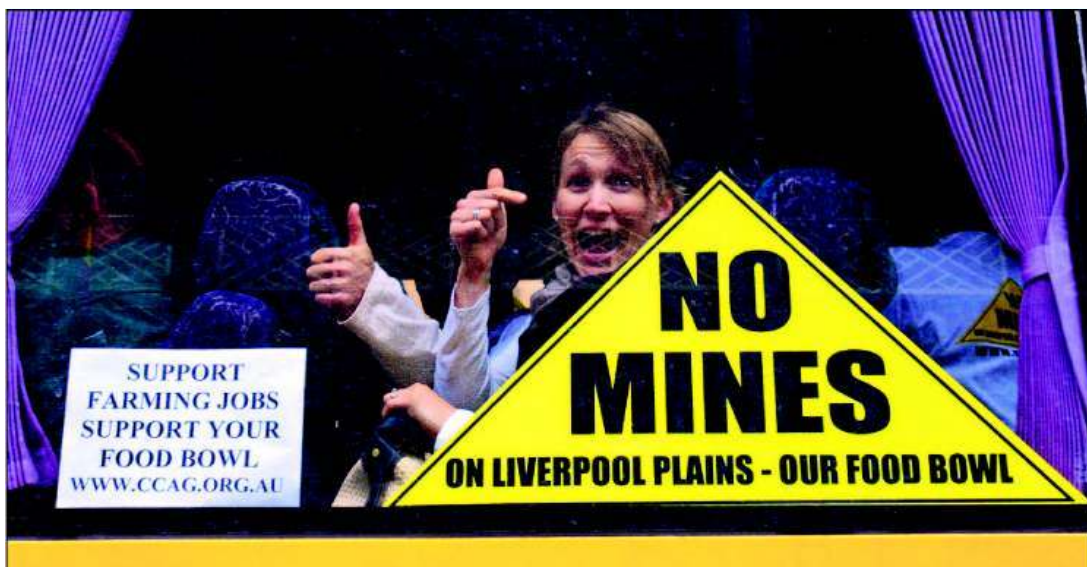
After the defeat of the bill, the Greens leader, Lee Rhiannon, said windfalls from the mining industry had "blinded the Government to the big-pictures issues of food security and climate change".

But Mr Macdonald said the bill would "destroy mining in NSW, it would destroy economic growth and cause job losses across our state".

In one concession to the Liverpool Plains farmers, Mr Macdonald announced a water study in the region which covers some of the richest farmland in the state and important aquifers.

The water study will cover the whole Namoi River catchment and will be run by an independent chairman, the former president of the NSW Farmers Association, Mal Peters.

The study is designed to identify any risks associated with mining and coal development on water resources. BHP-Billiton is likely to complete its exploration program before the study is finished.



Losing battle, for now ... farmers and land owners protest outside NSW Parliament yesterday over the mining of prime farmland. Photo: Nick Moir