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# Black soil, coal and water

GOVERNMENTS would be unwise to think they can easily ignore the public concern that is building up over plans to mine coal under the black soil of the Liverpool Plains. The region, with its rich volcanic earth and rarely failing aquifers, has long been among Australia's most productive farming areas for grain. Those aquifers also feed the headwaters of the Murray-Darling river system. The region's farms and towns exemplify sustainable agriculture when so much else is shrinking from drought and climate change.

Many will wonder at the ultimate rationality of encouraging more coal production at the expense of high-grade farmland when the world has recently experienced a foretaste of the worldwide grain supply shortages that may be in prospect and is trying to limit greenhouse gases, and in Australia's case when it is desperately trying to revive its major river system.

The money of the big mining companies is sweeping these doubts aside, in the corridors of government at least. Between them, BHP Billiton and China's Shenhua have paid \$400 million upfront to the cash-strapped NSW Government – already pretty captive to the coal and power industries anyway – for exploration rights. Now the Federal

**The answer has to lie in the science.**

Government's Foreign Investment Review Board has given Shenhua clearance to buy some of the 25 farms it intends to purchase on the surface of its lease at three times the going rate for farmland.

Even conservative farmers and rural folk, traditionally dismissive of greenie concerns, have been galvanised into protest, mounting a blockade of BHP Billiton operations and launching a court case over alleged corner-cutting in the NSW Government's approvals. The miners say they will take all care to mine under ridges rather than cultivated land. Aside from the billion tonnes or more of coal in this area, they see this kind of dispute threatening their interests in Queensland's Darling Downs and elsewhere.

Belatedly, the state has agreed to a hydrological study to see if aquifers are really in danger. But it may not be possible for scientists to reach any definite conclusion. With so much money already laid out, it will then be difficult for the State Government to refuse or limit consent to mine. Since relations with China are already jarred over foreign investment rules, Canberra will be equally cautious.

The answer has to lie in the science, giving the hydrologists the resources and time they need for a full study. If mining proceeds, extraction should be tailored to avoid damage to water sources and restoration of damaged farmland should be insisted upon.