



press clip

# Warden upholds coalmining plan

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Environment Editor

FARMERS on the Liverpool Plains vowed to continue their campaign against the mining giant BHP Billiton after a court yesterday upheld the company's right to access their properties to explore a huge coalfield south of Gunnedah.

"I'm disappointed to say the least," said Geoff Brown outside the Gunnedah court, where the mining warden, John Bailey, upheld a decision by an arbitrator granting BHP access to four properties where Mr Brown and three other farmers had tried to restrict the company.

But Mr Brown and his wife said they will not drop their fight against the company.

"We are still not going to give them access to our land," Mr Brown said. "We are not finished yet. We will dig in."

The battle between the farmers and mining companies on the Liverpool Plains, one of the

state's richest agricultural regions, is putting political pressure on the NSW Primary Industries Minister, Ian Macdonald, who is also responsible for mining.

Mr Macdonald granted the exploration licence to BHP for \$99 million several years ago to search for an estimated 500 million tonnes of coal.

At the time, the minister and the company said it had the potential to launch one of the biggest new coalmining ventures in the state. Mr Macdonald later also granted a Chinese coal company, Shenhua, an exploration licence in the area.

The independent federal MP for New England, Tony Windsor, who was at the court, said the decision would exacerbate tensions on the Liverpool Plains between the miners and farmers.

"This will strengthen the opposition of landholders," Mr Windsor told the *Herald*. "The

minister should never have granted the exploration licence to BHP.

"BHP has good reason to be concerned. I think the decision will promote civil disobedience."

But BHP welcomed the decision yesterday. Stephen David, who is managing the project, said the decision largely upheld an arbitrator's finding handed down several months ago.

"We now have in place a mechanism where we can continue our exploration work on these four properties," he said.

Mr David said the company would have discussions with the landowners before any new work was started.

He said the company had already drilled about 130 boreholes in the area and the land of interest had been brought back to about 150 square kilometres.



Local battle ... opponents outside court yesterday. Photo: Paul Mathews