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Upper Hunter Coalmining

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Mr GEORGE SOURIS (Upper Hunter) [1.41 p.m.]: I support my constituents in the districts of Caroona, near Quirindi, and Gloucester who are concerned about the potential impact of coalmining. I am prompted to do so because yesterday in question time, the Minister for Planning referred to approval of the Metropolitan Coal Project as "a landmark decision that protects our waterways, our drinking water supply and our environment". The Minister went on to state:

This approval provides protection for the Waratah Rivulet and Eastern Tributary from subsidence impacts. It imposes a barrier underneath those important waterways. No mining will occur there.

The point I make is that the districts of Caroona, near Quirindi, and Gloucester have not only prime agricultural land but also very significant water resources. In particular, the Caroona area has the Namoi Valley groundwater resource that is regarded as a world-class, world-quality and utterly unique water resource. It underpins the equally unique fertile source of the Liverpool Plains. The quality of the soil and the quality of the groundwater produce a unique effect, and the prime agricultural land in the district, known as the Liverpool Plains, is of huge significance.

I have no comment to make about the area in which the Metropolitan Coal Project will be located, but if the protection of water resources is the basis of exclusion of an area from the impact of mining—in the Metropolitan case, it would be underground mining—surely the Liverpool Plains would qualify for exclusion. The problem has always been that the Department of Mineral Resources encourages coalmining and issues exploration licences in accordance with its primary role, which is the development of coal reserves. But approximately 10 years later the Department of Planning, which is responsible for weighing up the environmental impacts and considering conditions of planning approval, embarks upon an approval process. That results in 10 years of agony for local people.

The Government ought to institute a better assessment of mining projects prior to granting mineral exploration licences and determining the appropriateness of coalmining, particularly in agricultural districts. The precedent set by the Metropolitan Coal Project is important because, although it is retrospective, it establishes the prime reason for exclusion of mining as the protection of water resources, but the primary criterion for exclusion should include the protection of prime agricultural land, and should override the planning and mineral exploration process. That is what should have occurred in relation to the Liverpool Plains because at the stage when the mineral exploration licence was granted, when the planning process was instituted, at the present time and for all time in the future, coalmining is completely inappropriate on the Liverpool Plains area.

The agricultural production of the Liverpool Plains district is vested entirely in the groundwater reserves, which are unique and invaluable. Even during the worst droughts, the Liverpool Plains area produces excellent crops. The quality of soils is such that the Caroona area is widely recognised as prime agricultural land. I urge the Minister for Planning to apply the exclusion criterion she espoused yesterday in the House to protect the unique water resources and prime agricultural land of the Liverpool Plains, where unique agricultural and environmental benefits are so great that coalmining should never be allowed to occur.

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