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## BHP Billiton Carooona Mine Project

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### BHP BILLITON CAROONA MINE PROJECT

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**Mr GEORGE SOURIS** (Upper Hunter) [5.32 p.m.]: Tonight I want to inform the House about matters pertaining to Carooona coalmining in an area near the town of Quirindi, south of Gunnedah, in my electorate. I raise this matter in the House because the Government has granted BHP Billiton a coal exploration licence in the area. I put on the record my general opposition to any form of mining on the Breeza Plains, particularly coalmining, both open cut and underground. The area known as the Breeza Plains, sometimes known as the Liverpool slopes and plains or the north-west slopes and plains, is a delicate area in terms of hydrology. Only a few years ago the Government demonstrated the delicate nature of the ground water resource in the Namoi Valley by introducing restrictions and reductions in licence entitlements, which in some zones were up to 90 per cent.

That shows how critical the Government deemed the underground water resource. I am surprised that the Government has granted an exploration licence to BHP with the prospect of an open-cut or underground coalmine in the area. The Breeza Plains, with their alluvial black soils, could be regarded as one of the world's leading grain production areas. I have no doubt that underground mining, particularly the longwall method, would destroy the delicate hydrology and intricate pattern of channels and irrigation on the surface.

I also want the House to note my displeasure and that of the community about something that was revealed in a budget estimates committee hearing. The Minister was asked whether there was any prospect of an electricity generation plant, a power station, being built in the area. The Minister revealed that BHP Billiton had asked the Government for indicative approval to include a thermal power station, which would use some of the resource mined in that area, in utilisation studies in preparation for environmental assessment. The Minister said that it was an initiative of BHP, but that BHP had the approval of the Government to embark on these utilisation studies. I put on the parliamentary record that I oppose any form of mining on the Breeza Plains. Further, I oppose any form of electricity power station in the vicinity, partly because of my general opposition to a power plant in the area but specifically because coalmining activity would take place so that the resource could feed the power station.

My displeasure arises primarily because the power plant proposal was never made public. The Minister did not make an announcement about it at the time of the granting of the exploration licence or even at the time indicative approval was given by the Government for BHP to include a proposal for a power station in its utilisation studies. If the Minister had not made the statement in reply to a question at a budget estimates committee hearing, it may have gone completely unnoticed and the community would have remained ignorant that BHP was examining plans for an electricity power station in the area.

There has been a lack of information from the Department of Mineral Resources, the Minister for Mineral Resources and the proponent, BHP Billiton, on resource management and the impact of the proposal on the environment and natural resources, particularly the hydrology. Now the community is surprised to learn of an additional potential use and that the impact is being studied by BHP Billiton with the approval of the Government. Again I express my displeasure that the Government has not seen fit to make a formal announcement about the proposal. It is patently obvious that following the estimates committee hearing the Government should have formalised an announcement.

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