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Residents voice health concerns

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In 2006 the Greens called for a suspension in the endless expansion of the open cut mines being blasted across the paddocks of the Hunter Valley. The Minister for the Hunter, Michael Costa, hit back typically hard, accusing the Greens of having "rocks in their heads" and dismissing the bid as "ridiculous".

A month later the federal Labor member for the region, Joel Fitzgibbon, backed him, accusing those who questioned the mining of being "environmental extremists" bent on "jihad against the industry".

Labor might like to believe that concern about the region's coalmines and two power plants - a third has been approved - is a Green phenomenon, but the story is not so simple.

One of the best known local campaigners for cleaner mining and more transparent regulation is the Singleton councillor Lynn MacBain.

After raising her children in Singleton and working in the local Woolworths, Cr MacBain became politically active in 1998, concerned not only by the thickening haze in the region, but by what she saw as sloppy government regulation of heavy industry. Her husband Rob remains a mine worker.

"It's the government we have a problem with, not the mines. The mines say they abide by their conditions of consent, then if it is the conditions of consent that aren't protecting you, then you have to do something."

Mr MacBain fully supports his wife's work. He wonders why three of his four grandchildren raised in the area have asthma.

"The amount of cancer you hear about and the number of people I know who have respiratory problems seems out of proportion," he says.

Mrs MacBain says that since she began in local government, Singleton council has gradually veered from outright support for the region's heavy industry to a far more questioning point of view.

Carol Russell lives just outside of town with her husband, Bruce, a farmer, and son Mark, 32. Mark has worked in mine-related industries since he left school. He has always enjoyed the work and Mrs Russell is grateful for the region's prosperity, which she attributes to the coal that lies thick beneath the farmland.

But she, too, has been stirred to action. In the past 10 years she has become an amateur expert on the region's climate, air-pollution, particulate matter, toxicology and political campaigning.

"Our issue is not with the mines, it is with the government and the regulations and the legislation that is meant to protect us," she says.

Along the coal seam and up the valley at Muswellbrook, a miner, Peter Kennedy, has put his own job at risk by campaigning for stricter and more transparent regulation of the Hunter's mines and power stations.

Even as a miner he managed to secure a position on the Muswellbrook environmental committee.

Tackling the Greens in 2006, Mr Costa, an out and proud climate change sceptic, said, "Let's make this absolutely clear, on the record, the NSW government supports the coal industry."

Perhaps, but not all its constituents do.