

Charlie Wilson

CQ Mining Forum Presentation

Coal mining the floodplain – a landholder's perspective

When asked to present today, my initial reaction was to say that I felt FBA could get someone maybe a little less volatile than me.

On reflection however I thought that I had lived for 25 years next to a major coal mine and I could talk about my experiences and maybe provide some ideas on how things could be done better.

Coalmining in our region has been a godsend for the economy, which has in many ways helped in some way every person in this town and region. Mine workers, town workers, contractors, investors, small businesses have all benefited.

To some extent adjacent landholders have benefited as well!

In the early years this mine was small. We were there during exploration and start up. We got to know the management and staff really well in those early years. We transported joint venturers in the mud to sites, hosted barbeques, had dinner parties.

Over the years we leased a shed to the mine, agisted cattle on the mine, and leased farming land from them for a long period.

We did well from our arrangements with the mine and we appreciated it, but so did they. They had a local who sang their praise and that was valuable.

Over the years we built a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. If there was an issue we were open and frank and we solved it.

By the mid 1990's the development started on the floodplain and the coal extraction started to ramp up.

The floodplain development approvals in those days were done with little consultation with neighbours and suddenly the levees went up and the anabranch of the river disappeared and they got stuck into it.

The mine was saving topsoil and restoring the floodplain to existing levels. Wow! I was impressed. In fact we farmed and levelled some land that was mined and we even produced some wheat!

By the late 1990's the influence of China on the market was just starting. Production was required. We noticed more and more the overburden piles

rising on the floodplain, the corporate style was increasing, and there was a change in the management style.

Suddenly we had a corporation which appeared (at least to an outsider) wanted coal at any cost - to landholders and the environment.

Very recently this mine has been consulting on another major expansion mostly on the floodplain. I have left the district but was involved with the consultation process until about 6 months ago.

This process in my view was really that- just a process to an already decided outcome.

We as neighbours met with the mine's consultants, and whilst they listened to our concerns, took notes for the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), the process in my view was a set up.

For example the hydrology consultant doing the study on the floodplain stated in his words when questioned by me as to his qualifications that he "had done a lot of work for the mining industry". I thought that this was worrisome where a mine could use a hydrologist apparently sympathetic to the industry. I queried the process as to a "peer review ", but was told there was none.

We were as landholders considering employing our own independent consultant to review the mines work. This we would have had to fund ourselves. Our concerns were that the levees would increase the size of the flood in the upstream areas and increase the velocity of the water downstream.

Serious issues...

We didn't have faith in the current system that our concerns were to be met. So the only way we could be certain of the impacts was to pay for our own consultants, and even after doing this study we were still quite sure that we could NOT implement change if it were required.

As well as this, we were told that the EPA doesn't have the resources to conduct its own study and usually relies on the mines study.

A big problem is that when projects get a "major project" status from government there really is little any individual or group can do to stop or make major change to the development.

Also from what people tell me within the EPA there is little they can do to influence environmental outcomes as Government wants the project to proceed.

As well rural landholders (and this is spoken about a lot) are sick and tired of what they call the "two rule" attitude of government.

The first rule is for mines who move creeks, destroy vegetation and mine floodplains with seemingly limited re-vegetation and reclamation and, Rule 2 is for the agricultural sector with strict tree clearing laws based on flawed science, and a water allocation regime designed to protect the environment at the expense of licenced water users.

Recently I had the pleasure of listening to Professor Dr Bob Miles from the Central Qld University. Professor Miles is also part of the Qld Centre for Climate change.

Bob put up some really frightening slides about CO2 emission build up, temperature rises and arctic snow meltdown. CO2 in the atmosphere has risen by about 70% in the past 20 years and temperatures have increased by around 1.5 degrees. By 2100 when our grandchildren are middle-aged it will have risen by possibly 3 degrees but up to 6 degrees. This will be accompanied by the total loss of the Great Barrier Reef as we know it. Rainforest trees will be dying. Rainfall will have decreased by 50% (it already has decreased by 20% in CQ)

This is all before this recent surge in coal extraction and use!!!

So where to from here? I would like to provide four ideas for solutions.

1) We all need to do better environmentally

Obviously the serious issue of climate change needs global leadership but that leadership direction must come from the grassroots.

I noted that the State of California is suing carmakers in America for not putting better emission controls on cars and blaming these carmakers for the pollution they caused.

Could coal mines and coal fired power stations be sued in much the same way at some time in the future?

The agricultural sector is working on its "best practice."

Cotton was a vilified industry during the heady spraying and poor water use days of the 1990's.

Cotton farmers have reduced their chemical application now by up to 90% and water is increasingly being used at best practice levels (that's if there is any water).

The grazing sector (as I mentioned before) has strict tree management controls in place whilst the dryland farming sector has had a huge move to zero till and leads the world in this technology.

But still more could be done with fencing riparian areas, encouraging bio-diversity areas, and slowing further nutrient movement to the reefs to name a few.

My point is that the agricultural sector was forced from continued poor practice to lift its act, and whilst mines are very good at health and safety, and production techniques, there could possibly be a case to answer for environmental practice and consultation.

Coal mines must ensure the coal they sell is sold on to emission friendly clients.

And they could demonstrate more “best practice” in environmental practices.

Someone from the mining Industry could take me to task over their environmental credentials. If I am wrong then clearly the mining Industry needs to better communicate its “best practice” credentials

2) Mines could be better neighbours

If there were 50 coal mines in central Queensland with say 5 neighbours each then there are some 250 families with experiences similar to my own. I would ask mines to respect landholders more.

These 250 families were carrying on their business and lifestyle before you came. They generally are trusting and will support you if you support them and are up-front, decent and respectful to them.

Mines generally handle neighbours issues with a mine “PR” person. I would suggest that to get better relationships going, the mine manager or his deputy would be a better person to work with neighbours.

3) There is a greater role for Government

As I have said, there is a strong perception in the community that mines are not getting the level of environmental scrutiny that they should.

I would like to think that I am wrong in that assumption, however I am sure that every rural producer would support me in asking that the EPA and other Government departments notably DNR enforce greater controls on coalmines as well as better monitoring and enforcing of rehab work.

Adjacent landholders would like to see a more transparent system from government agencies that deliver honesty and fairness.

Also, we would strongly recommend the abolition of the 2 rule ethos I spoke of earlier whereby mines appear to get a better deal environmentally than other sectors.

And finally...

4) We need to think of our kids

I am of the strong opinion and so is a lot of the community that mining of the river floodplain should not happen.

The river Nile has supported life from agriculture for over 4000 years.

Australia has only a very small amount of this highly fertile soil.

This soil should be preserved at all costs for future generations NOT torn up for a small amount of a non-renewable resource and left as a virtual wasteland.

Thank-you for the opportunity to present today

Charles Wilson
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