



SE news

HD Standing their ground

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LP **NEWCASTLE** locals headed west this month to show their support for northern NSW farmers struggling to stop the construction of a colossal open-cut coal mine on their doorstep.

Hundreds of visitors attended the three-day protest festival near the small Liverpool Plains village of Breeza, 250 kilometres north-west of Newcastle.

TD The Shenhua Watermark coal mine planned for the area has been granted federal and state government approval, but sections of the Liverpool Plains community are determined to keep their highly productive farmland coal free.

Local anti-mining groups joined with national environmental organisations to stage the Liverpool Plains Harvest Festival on a local property and highlight the importance of the region's existing multi-billion dollar agricultural industry.

The Liverpool Plains agricultural production output is 40 per cent above the national average, according to [Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics and Sciences \(ABARES\)](#) data published in 2014. In 2012-13 the gross value of agricultural production in the region was \$2.4 billion, with the plains accounting for 91 per cent of NSW sorghum production, 58 per cent of legumes, 54 per cent of cotton and 26 per cent of cattle production.

The Liverpool Plains are a patchwork quilt of thick crops and green pastures at the moment, with harvest progressing on most properties. Crops of wheat, durum, chickpea and faba bean, in varying shades of green and gold, formed the backdrop for the festival.

Newcastle student Stella Comyn was one of hundreds of citysiders who travelled to show their support for the Liverpool plains farming industry.

"Coming out here and seeing the land and meeting the farmers personally definitely brings it home," she says. "It's beautiful country and it's prime farming land. The coal industry is only interested in short term gains so it's about standing up for the local community and protecting our future, that's why I'm here."

Shenhua, the Chinese-owned energy company behind the development, estimates coal reserves within its proposed mining area west of Breeza could support a 10 million tonne per annum coal operation for up to the 30 years.

The project is approximately 282 kilometres by rail from the Port of Newcastle, and 30 kilometres from the nearest coal mine, Whitehaven's Werris Creek Coal mine, which produces less than a quarter of the amount of coal expected at Shenhua Watermark.

The open-cut pits near Breeza would total 35 square kilometres and were expected to generate \$902 million in annual direct and indirect regional business turnover.

To compensate for the loss of agricultural land, approximately 3233 hectares would require rehabilitation post mining, as well as 2384 hectares of native woodland, associated grassland and koala habitat.

The company aims to employ 600 people during construction, then 400 during the operation of the project, but protesters argue food and water security issues outweigh any economic gains the project might offer.

Newcastle resident Mary-Ann Purkiss travelled to Breeza to show her opposition to the construction of a coal mine in the heart of some of the country's most productive farm land.

"I wanted to be a part of the critical mass so that when people looked at the 'big photo' they would see that a lot of people are concerned," she explains. "This is a Chinese mine and we're just selling our country out from underneath us."

Although she was keen to support the effort to protect Australian farmland, Purkiss also believed the mine could affect her life in the city.

"Newcastle is already one of the biggest coal ports in the world and this mine will mean more uncovered coal wagons and more shipping movements through Newcastle Harbour," she says. "More coal is coming to Newcastle and the people of Newcastle need to be concerned."

"We're already shipping a lot of coal and we're surviving, the economy is doing OK, do we need more and how much is enough? We all need to ask that question."

The festival enjoyed the support of high-profile politicians and speakers, including Tasmanian Senator Jacqui Lambie, NSW Greens MP Jeremy Buckingham, former NSW Farmers president Fiona Simson and former federal member for New England Tony Windsor.

Windsor retired from office in 2013 but represented the area for over 20 years as a state and federal politician. He argues the Liverpool Plains should be reserved for agricultural industries only.

"In Australia the reality is we are going to have some sort of mining activity, for employment and for power generation, but there are plenty of other places to mine other than these high-risk water resource flood plains," he said.

"I'm not anti-mines, but these mines are dangerous because we have these massive volumes of ground water."

Farmers, politicians and researchers gave presentations on makeshift stages set up in machinery sheds which were emptied of tractors and headers for the occasion. Food, fashion, art and information stalls lined the sheds, with machinery on display at various points around the grounds.

Guided tours of crops and farming operations were also offered, as well as encounters with local wildlife species.

The festival helped canvass a range of issues, including threats posed to ancient sacred sites and unique wildlife within the mining area.

While there are several areas of concern surrounding the Shenhua Watermark coal mine, members of the farming community are most worried about risks posed to the existing water supply.

Susie Lyle, a local farmer involved with the Caroon Coal Action Group, believes there is not enough information or research available to guarantee the future water supply if the mine goes ahead.

"Everything is unknown, if we're going to take a risk like this in an area where the water resource is so important and the whole concept of the production of the Liverpool plains relies on the water, where are we going to be if something goes wrong?" she asks.

Breeza farmer John Hamparsum agreed that local agricultural enterprises could not co-exist with Shenhua's coal mine.

"My concern is that this mine, and others, will have a long-term cumulative effect that will last for thousands of years impacting the quality of our water and also the availability of our water," he says.

"Living next door to the mine, sound and dust are going to be other issues for us personally, but the long-term issue is water."

"The Liverpool plains has one of the largest high-quality groundwater resources in the country and it's something that has to be valued and looked after.

"There could be an increase in salinity and an increase in heavy metals and these things will leach out into the systems for thousands of years and impact on what is a very high quality resource."

Shenhua Watermark's environmental impact statement addresses groundwater concerns by citing modelling data collected by a hydrologist employed by the company, which indicates groundwater levels would recover post-mining. It also disputes claims the mine would affect water quality, saying "aquifers within the Project Boundary have an existing salt concentration of equal to or significantly greater than the salinity potentially produced from the Overburden Emplacement Areas . . . seepage from the OEAs will have a negligible impact on surrounding groundwater resources."

Shenhua intends to progressively purchase existing water licences currently being used for agricultural purposes, which Hamparsum argues will effectively reduce the availability of water and limit the food production capacity of the region.

Aside from the environmental impacts, locals are also concerned about the effect a large coal mine will have on the social fabric of the region. Hamparsum says many families have already left the area, with Shenhua purchasing large tracts of farm land in recent years.

"We've already lost 43 families so they are no longer buying supplies in town like drench, seed or fertiliser, so that's taken a fair bit out of the community already," he says.

"Once water is sold to the mine, those farms will no longer be irrigated farms, they'll become drylands farms and the returns generated on that land are reduced so that affects the community again."

Shenhua still requires a mining licence from the NSW Department of Energy before it can begin construction, but festivalgoers hope the government will bow to public pressure and refuse to grant it.

The festival generated much discussion about possible exit strategies for the company, which has already invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the project. Suggestions included a government-funded compensation package or the facilitation of an alternative food production project.

While similar battles are being fought by farming communities across Australia, the younger generation of farmers on the Liverpool Plains are giving the community a unique edge in the campaign to stop the mine.

Liverpool Plains Youth, a group of 50 young farming members, formed in November last year and was heavily involved in the organisation of the festival. The group holds weekly meetings at a local pub and has built up a national presence in the media and online, with almost 7000 followers on Facebook.

Breeza member Sarah Sulman joined after moving home to work on her family's sheep property last year.

"The next generation is particularly active on the Liverpool Plains, there are so many young people here and it's such a tight-knit community, we're desperate to save our farms," she says.

"The festival is about celebrating and showcasing the area, because there is no mine here yet. It's to show the politicians we have an army building and we are going to win."

For more information: shenhuawatermark.com [<http://shenhuawatermark.com>] or landwaterfuture.org.au/shenhua [<http://landwaterfuture.org.au/shenhua>]

CO aubare : Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences

IN i0 : Agriculture

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