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Queensland Greens submission on Queensland's agriculture and resource industries

17 August 2012

Mr Rob Hansen
Research Director
Agriculture, Resources and Environment Committee
Parliament House
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Dear Mr Hansen

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the AERC's Inquiry into agriculture and resource industries.

The Queensland Greens have been very disturbed by the disruption to farming communities by resource industries particularly over the past two years as mining and gas companies have been given exploration leases over food producing areas on the Dawson, Darling Downs, Lockyer Valley and in the Scenic Rim.

Since rural residents feel that they are not being properly protected by existing regulations we are very much concerned about any attempt to portray current regulation as a burden or to see government oversight of these environmentally harmful industries reduced. We would like to make the following brief points.

1. Much resource industry regulation has come about because past governments have given approval to projects with large environmental footprints. Environmental regulation is essential to protect waterways, wildlife, coastal environments, air quality, human health and workplace health and safety.

If the government is concerned to protect Queensland's crucial human and environmental assets without imposing heavy costs on industry then the best response is to not approve such

projects in the first place. Allowing projects to proceed without guaranteeing protection of human health and the Queensland environment simply shifts the real costs of these projects onto the people of Queensland.

The best way to reduce regulation on such projects would be to recognise the precautionary principle and refuse approval in the first instance.

2. The Queensland Greens have publicly called for a moratorium on any further coal seam gas development and reiterate that call. The best way to assess the workability of existing regulation would be to hold a moratorium so that current regulation and practices can be debated openly by the community and in a timeframe that allows full community participation.

3. We are also very concerned about the timing of this inquiry. The LNP promised during the election campaign to put in place regional planning. We would like to see this put in place as soon as possible so that farmland and townships areas are protected and no-go areas for mining and gas are clearly understood by industry. The current strategic cropping land does not give sufficient protection to nature refuges and rural communities which need stronger and clearer protections.

4. The Greens do not accept the mining industry's arguments that environmental regulation costs are too high, nor that Queensland has world's best practice when it comes to mining industry standards. Queensland regulation of coal mining is much weaker than some states of the United States for example. The state of Wyoming in the USA, currently home to the world's largest open-cut coalmine Black Thunder which produces 40mta, requires all stockpiles of coal and transporting of coal to be covered to minimise coal dust. Wyoming also requires coal mines to be rehabilitated to the original contours of the land. They are not allowed to leave massive voids as New Hope Coal near Acland has proposed for its Stage 3 expansion.

5. Any review of regulation standards for resource industries should include a thorough investigation of rehabilitation liabilities. Such a review must consider the need for legislative reform so that mine sites are not allowed to be surrendered simply as 'stable' and 'non-polluting' land forms; they should be required to be capable of future productive uses. The greatest cost of our existing regulatory burden falls not to industry but to the taxpayers of Queensland who are forced to carry the on-going maintenance costs of to minimise harmful pollution from old mine sites.

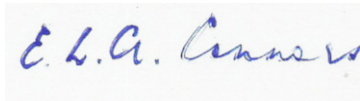
6. More stringent regulation of tailings and other dams also requires review. It is not acceptable given Queensland's known variable climate for mine owners to not be prepared for wet weather events. Yet both the central Queensland coal fields, as covered in the report of the Flood Inquiry Commission, and now Yabulu Nickel Refinery near Townsville "demand" the right to pollute Queensland waterways and the Great Barrier Reef because they have not maintained dams to withstand wet weather events. Release of pollutants and dumping of mine tailings on the reef is an unacceptable cost to current and future generations of Queenslanders. These practices are potentially of dire harm to agriculture, fishing and tourism and should be the subject of considered review by this parliament.

7. The Greens have no objection to a 1-stop shop for information about relevant regulations or to a common commencement date.

8. We oppose the cutting of staff to enforcement agencies and regret to note that the new government cut staff before even evaluating the existing regulatory framework.

We urge the government to maintain protection of Queensland's environment and of Queenslanders' health and do so not only on behalf of existing residents but of future generations who deserve to inherit this state's wonderful natural resources in no worse a state than when this government inherited responsibility for their protection.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "E. L. A. Connors". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a light grey rectangular background.

Dr Libby Connors

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