

Coal, dollars, food, water

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While the NSW coal industry talks about wanting to be a better neighbour to other land users, and while the state government talks about its promised new land-use strategy, the NSW Farmers' Association has thrown down a pre-emptive gauntlet.

The farmers want a moratorium on all new mining and coal seam gas developments until a strategy is devised to protect some of the state's threatened agricultural and river lands.

In this, they are asking no more than has already been enacted in Queensland, where about four per cent of that state has been declared strategic crop land and cordoned off from mining.

Mining companies are furious about the Queensland decision and they are set to fight any similar move in NSW. In a press release issued in response to the moratorium call, the Minerals Council said the farmers were "advocating the use of a sledge hammer to crack a walnut". The farmers, for their part, probably see their call as an attempt by some fast-vanishing walnuts to duck the busy hammer.

Farmers' spokesmen said their association had been talking to miners and politicians for 10 months, but while talks dragged, mining development was alienating ever more farmland. About 70 per cent of the state was now under mineral and petroleum title or application, they said.

The government continually concedes that its planning and approvals processes take no account of cumulative impacts of mining and that these impacts have accelerated over the past two decades, during which massive open-cut mines have changed the face of many areas, especially the Hunter Valley. But these admissions don't seem to result in much change, a situation many blame on the government's conflicted position as approval authority and beneficiary of large coal royalty payments.

The farmers want the state's agricultural and water resources to be properly mapped and protected. They want the Water Act overhauled to force miners and the government to submit to truthful assessments of potential impacts of mining proposals on aquifers and rivers. And they want "robust, independent monitoring" of air and water quality in mining areas.

The benefits to the entire state of such protective measures ought to be obvious, even to those with a vested interest in mining.