

Lack of mine control forces farmers' hand

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FARMERS don't usually call for moratoriums. This week, though, a meeting of the NSW Farmers Association executive council in Sydney backed plans for a pause on any new **mining** or coal seam gas development across the state, with more than 70 members of the council offering unanimous support.

As the chairwoman of the association's **mining** taskforce, I should explain our reasons for calling for a moratorium, and quell any misinterpretation of our intentions.

The **mining** industry in NSW is expanding rapidly. So much so that mineral and petroleum titles and applications now cover about 70 per cent of the state. This includes many "sleeper" exploration licences issued under previous regimes that technically should have expired, but can "reappear" and be acted on 20 years down the track.

Legislation historically designed to facilitate **mining** rather than protect valuable natural resources or landholder property rights is allowing unprecedented expansion of **mining** and coal seam gas activity on productive agricultural land.

Communities are worried about the effects on their land, their water, and on existing valuable agricultural industries. They're worried vast tracts of land could be sterilised and valuable water resources that have taken generations to form could be depleted or destroyed.

There's no adequate process in NSW governing the granting of exploration licences. There's no adequate process to assess biophysical or natural resource features, current land use and community sustainability.

There's also no adequate process to properly include local communities in meaningful consultation.

In the absence of any such planning controls, the coal seam gas industry has been encouraged to come to the state with the promise of a five-year holiday for any coal seam royalties. The act governing this industry, the Onshore Petroleum Act, is at worst woeful and at best totally inadequate to regulate, control or guide this exciting, yet potentially devastating industry.

In layman's terms, coal seam methane gas is held in the coal seams by the hydrostatic pressure of water. It's always saline and contains a mix of toxic chemicals such as arsenic in varying amounts.

To release the gas, the water needs to be released (brought to the surface and either disposed of or stored), then the gas either escapes or is captured.

The surface effect of the industry is much smaller than open-cut coal **mining** and offers exciting future opportunities.

But what's going on below the surface when millions of litres of water are released? All that toxic water on top of the ground has already proved to be a major problem for areas in the US and Queensland, where it's still relatively new.

The knowledge surrounding the environmental effects of this industry is sketchy at best. The industry admits it's still a long way from knowing what to do with all that water, how to store it, how to treat it, how to deal with the toxic solids byproduct - and, so far, it's been unable to restore highly productive agricultural land to the same standard it once was.

The long-term effects of this relatively new industry are largely unknown, but are potentially destructive and very alarming. There's a lot more science to do yet and the industry itself accepts it's a long way from knowing all the answers.

Despite all these unknowns, a glance at the publicly available maps showing petroleum titles and applications in NSW shows us the industry has targeted massive areas of the state, full steam ahead.

We're not calling for the **mining** and coal seam gas industries to be shut down across the state, nor are we suggesting they don't have a place in NSW. But we are suggesting we take a moment to identify the places where these industries can and cannot co-exist with agriculture.

We believe this can happen through statewide strategic planning where valuable natural resources, urban areas for growth, mineral resources and valuable agricultural resources are recognised. We believe this process would remove the uncertainty for all industries and communities, and ensure balance and future sustainability.

Until this form of planning is in place, we believe the sensible and rational thing to do is to take a step back, take a deep breath, and suspend any new **mining** or coal seam gas developments, until we know what we are doing.

Otherwise, we feel the old adage "act in haste, repent at leisure" could well apply to our future generations.

Fiona Simson is chairwoman of the
NSW Farmers Association **mining** taskforce.