

Friday, 18 March 2011

"WHEN wine enters, out goes the truth." Hogsback cannot claim credit for that little gem because Benjamin Franklin said it first, without realising that it would still be accurate 230 years later in Australia.



Ben's remark, no doubt fuelled by a session at a Boston tavern, was one of many he made about the delights of drinking wine – "wine is proof that God loves us and wants to make us happy" is another Franklin classic.

What a pity then that some people in the wine industry have decided they're not happy, and that the coal industry is their enemy, and that every opportunity should be taken to attack coal mining, which has worked peacefully alongside vineyards for centuries.

Across Australia there is ferment in the relationship between wine and coal, with the proposed government tax on carbon and an associated advertising campaign only likely to make things worse.

It doesn't have to be like that and there are ways for the coal industry to retaliate – not by attacking the wine industry, and its close cousin, tourism, but by pointing out how all three can work side by side.

The problem, and this is the important point, is that time is limited because the anti-coal campaigns in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales and the Margaret River wine district of Western Australia are building a head of steam, and becoming highly political.

Extreme elements of the Green movement are seizing the initiative from the wine producers and using their complaints about conflicting land use as a blunt instrument to bash the coal industry as part of their anti-carbon crusade.

Coal, through its assorted organisations, must not let that happen and a starting point is to get closer to the wine and tourism industries, learn more about what they want and help them, rather than fight them.

To not get closer and not understand risks an all-out confrontation where truth will most definitely fly out the window, wine or no wine.

A starting point is for the coal industry to point out the need for a region to have a diverse range of industries to ride out the cyclical swing from good to bad times, what might be called the economic imperative.

While wine and tourism are important for the Hunter and Margaret River regions, neither industry is in the best of health. Both are being clobbered by the high dollar, which is making exports more expensive and imports more competitive.

Coal in the Hunter adds an economic dimension to a region which would otherwise be doing it much tougher than it is. Jobs created by coal mining have helped the Hunter ride out many periods of downturn, and will do for decades to come.

Co-existence is the second button to push because with proper planning and mutual understanding it is possible to achieve mixed use of land. Most farmers understand that and, with the right level of compensation, they embrace it.

Information management is a third factor which must be managed carefully. When the truth dies over wine, as Ben warned so long ago, the coal industry must set the record straight, forcefully.

Nothing underlines that point better than the lack of response from the coal industry over a Sky News report, carried all the way into Europe, about the wine versus coal and coal seam gas debate.

This is a quote from that report. Sky reporter: "There are no regulations, there are no laws that actually cover these guys. When they do something wrong, there is no one there to police them."

Was there a reply from the coal industry to that exquisite piece of bulldust? No.

Nor was there a reply to the heading, which can still be found on Sky's website with a March 7 publication date: "One of the world's most famous wine-producing regions is under threat from a more lucrative industry – coal mining."