

Brown goes bush to support farmers in a fight for land

by freelance journalist Amanda Gearing

The stakes in a farmer versus miner battle were lifted into the federal political arena yesterday. Federal Greens leader Senator Bob Brown challenged Prime Minister Julia Gillard to stop a proposed coal mine that local farmers claim would ruin their prime farm land in the Felton Valley south of Toowoomba on the Darling Downs.

Senator Brown was the first federal party leader to visit the site of a proposed \$3.5 billion coal-to-liquid mine and petro-chemical plant. If approved, the project would supply 20% of Queensland's unleaded petrol by 2014.

Farmers in the district welcomed the Senator to the cold windy valley with a mug of hot pumpkin soup and a bunch of celery, illustrating their campaign slogan 'food not coal'. The Senator called for a moratorium on open cut coal mining in the valley until the full environmental and social cost of the project is known.

"It's the wrong plant in the wrong place," he said. And Brown challenged the prime minister to see the site for herself.

"Julia Gillard says she will stand by hard working Australians," he said. "Well come to Felton, prime minister, and see hardworking Australians being cut across by people who don't live here, won't live here, who have never been here, but want to make money out of the potential livelihoods of hardworking Australians in this valley."

A lone voice in favour of the mine was Ambre Energy's business development manager Neil McGregor, who said the company was beginning a new environmental impact study after its previous project plans were vastly upgraded and the existing EIS had to be scrapped.

The original \$485 million pilot project to produce a diesel substitute from the huge low-grade coal deposit using coal-to-liquid technology failed to attract investors. Ambre Energy re-drafted the proposal setting out plans in April for a vastly larger \$3.5 billion coal-to-liquid plant to manufacture unleaded petrol. The company would need to raise investor capital to fund the project, he said.

A new EIS will be submitted to the state government in March and Ambre expects to begin mine construction by the end of 2011. An open-cut mine would operate for an estimated 50 years, digging four million tons of coal a year and producing 940 million litres of unleaded petrol a year.



Senator Bob Brown with Felton farm children (photo: Jonathan Gearing)

If Felton farming families opposed the original project, they are more vehemently opposed to the new one which will sit on the same site, beside Hodgson Creek at the headwaters of the Murray-Darling Basin. Brown said coal mining had no future in a world threatened by climate change and Australia needed to transform the power industry to use renewable energy resources.

“Two per cent of Queensland is high-quality cropping land. Petro-chemical plants and open cut coal is last century. Clean renewable food production and green energy is this century,” he said.

“Farmers have put up with a moratorium on tree clearing — it won’t hurt the coal seam gas people and the open cut coal people to have a moratorium at least until the environmental, community, social and economic impacts on the region are studied.”

Brown concedes the Greens won’t be able to prevent the mine from going ahead, but he promised to use the party’s balance of power in the Senate to get the best possible outcome. “The decision lies with [Environment Minister] Peter Garrett,” he said. “He can stop this process now.”