Friends of Felton’s first AGM gives us the opportunity to look back and reflect on what we have achieved and to look forward to the challenges that lie ahead.

It’s hard to believe that FOF is almost 3 years old. We got together because we decided we would not lie down and allow a mining company motivated solely by greed to wreck our farmland, our environment and our community. That determination is stronger now than it has ever been.

It might seem strange to say, but I feel it has been a benefit to our campaign that the project proposed by Ambre Energy for Felton is so bad - in fact it would be hard to imagine a more damaging project. An open-cut coal mine on its own would be bad enough, but to combine that with a petrochemical plant is horrendous. This project would be bad wherever it was sited, but to put it here at Felton is sheer madness. We know that this battle is simply a case of right and wrong – it would be insane for any Government to allow this project to proceed.

In the past few years we have learned a lot. We’ve learned to be suspicious of mining company executives who promise that all stakeholders will be consulted – and we’ve also learned that a stakeholder is not just someone who gives a hand at a barbeque. We’ve learned to be suspicious of politicians who promise all things to all people. And we’ve learned how to decipher oily language and recognise spin when it appears – which is most of the time.

From the start, our campaign has been focussed on raising public awareness. We don’t have much money – although we’ve got a lot more than when we started – so we have to use our strength which is the people in our group.

We have combined protest actions with fundraising ventures and lobbying. Our protests have always been good-natured, and designed to attract media attention – with varying results. Some of our more memorable ones were the sit-in at Anna Bligh’s electoral office in Brisbane (when the Channel Nine cameraman helped us get a chant going), the wheelbarrow protest in the Toowoomba CBD, the welcome party for the Premier at CFM radio (when Jeffrey the koala claimed he put his arm around the Premier, but no one else noticed) our own breakfast briefing on the pavement outside the Burke & Wills Hotel (when we discovered that Frank was the new Picasso) and the rally at Parliament House (when someone in a platypus suit became a worldwide celebrity).

We have entered a float in Toowoomba’s Carnival of Flowers 3 years running, and have been buoyed by the public support each time. After our first outing in 2008, we decided the truck we used blew out too much black smoke to carry the banners saying ‘Felton – Clean & Green’, so we used a better one in 2009 – which broke down on the way and had to have emergency repairs in Cambooya. This year’s entry went without a hitch, so we must be improving.
Fundraising has been an important activity for us from the start. In order to mount a professional campaign we need to employ consultants to help us, and it is only through our fundraising that we have been able to do this. We have run cake stalls, film nights, car rallies, raffles and race days. We have also benefited from generous sponsorship from businesses and individuals. Funds raised have been used to engage consultants to undertake studies in the following areas: hydrology; land rehabilitation; social impact; cultural heritage; biodiversity; renewable energy.

Our lobbying has included meetings with State Government ministers including Anna Bligh, Stephen Robertson, Kate Jones, Tim Mulherin, Geoff Wilson and Andrew McNamara. We have had visits to Felton from Barnaby Joyce, Bob Brown, Larissa Waters and John Cobb. We also hosted a visit from the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications, and the Arts. We have had regular contact with our local MPs Ray Hopper, Ian MacFarlane, and Bruce Scott, and with Toowoomba Regional Council.

We have had regular contact with other groups fighting against mining and gas extraction. Mining companies the world over operate in the same way wherever they go, using ‘divide and conquer’ tactics to break down opposition. We must resist this at a local, regional, and national level.

We have formed strong connections with environmental groups, and we have learned that farmers and environmentalists have so much in common. The fact that we welcome Drew Hutton here tonight as our guest speaker, is an illustration of that strong new connection. Drew’s arrival on the Darling Downs as spokesman for Friends of the Earth has really focussed the attention of our city cousins on the threat posed by mining and gas extraction to our food bowl. We must continue to get the message out as strongly as we can, because we know that Governments only change the rules when they get pressure from voters – particularly if those voters live in marginal seats. There are moves afoot to form a loose alliance of groups like ours at a national level. I believe it is something that we should support.

The announcement this year that the Queensland Government would introduce legislation to protect ‘strategic cropping land’ was very significant. Many of us were pleasantly surprised at the strength of the language used in the policy framework that was released. The detail of the policy will be finalised soon, and I understand a meeting of the Government’s Working Group was held today. At the eleventh hour it seems the Queensland Resources Council is trying to derail the whole process, and there are strong rumours that the Government may cut back the area to be protected. Michael Roche has been quoted as saying strategic cropping land should be assessed as part of the EIS process. This would be totally unacceptable to FOF, because we all know that in practice the EIS process is simply a mechanism to legitimise environmental and social damage. Given that the QRC has been represented on the SCL Working Group, and signed up to the policy framework that was released, it is puzzling it would intervene in this way, but its influence on Government is enormous, and we should not take anything for granted.

The release of our renewable energy study has given our campaign a positive message. Trevor Berrill’s report shows that the Felton Valley could generate enough solar and wind power to power 160,000 average Queensland homes, without wrecking our farmland or the environment, while providing a significant number of new jobs that would not displace existing ones. This is clearly a plan that could be used as a model for other areas across Queensland and Australia. The scientific evidence for human-induced climate change is overwhelming. As the Garnaut report states, Australia is one of the countries most at risk from climate change, and at the same time one of the countries best able to take action against it. Our reserves of renewable energy are huge. It is only laziness and the influence of the big polluters on our political system that holds us back.
Some of us went to the launch in Brisbane last week of the Beyond Zero Emissions ‘Zero Carbon Australia’ stationary energy plan. This is a visionary plan that maps out a way for this country to move to 100% renewable energy for domestic electricity generation within 10 years, using proven solar and wind technology. Scientific research shows clearly that unless we take action fast worldwide to reduce our emissions, we’ll lose the Great Barrier Reef and the Murray-Darling. It’s a pity that the State Opposition has been so ineffective in highlighting the Government’s hypocrisy on green issues.

Looking ahead, we are waiting for the release of draft Terms of Reference for Ambre Energy’s EIS. We will do our very best to make the ToR as tough as we possibly can. Ambre say the EIS will be released mid next year, although it would be wise not to bet on that given their past record. We also await a decision by the Queensland Government on Significant Project declaration. If this is awarded to Ambre we will do our best to highlight what a shocking project this is, and what a national embarrassment it would be to Australia. Having taken $10,000 from Ambre Energy in sponsorship for the Major Projects 2010 Conference, it’s hard to see how the Government could declare this a Significant Project without being accused of corruption.

In closing, I would like to thank everyone who has helped make Friends of Felton into the effective group that it is today. So many people in our community have coped with so much stress over such a long time. We must continue to support each other as much as possible. There are too many people to thank personally but I would like to thank our super-efficient Secretary Hugh, our meticulous Treasurer Iris and our committee - Kate, Ian, Neville, John, Bob and Richard. I would particularly like to thank my wife Sally for her tremendous support.

This is a battle that we must win, and I believe it is one we will win. Felton’s fine without a mine!

Rob McCreath