



Case Study

Denman

Grantley Blake is a farmer whose family has owned Blakefield near Denman for more than a century. The farm is bordered by Mount Arthur mine to the north, Mangoola to the west, and a proposed underground coking coal project, Spur Hill, on the southern side.

Grantley lives on the farm with his wife, a retired nurse, his two sons and their families, including seven grandchildren, the oldest of whom is eight. He is deeply concerned about the health of his family – and says the coal dust from the Mangoola coal handling facility and stockpiles just three kilometres away from the farm causes constant respiratory problems.

The children are constantly on antibiotics for ear, nose and throat problems related to poor air quality, Mr Blake says, with the youngest suffering a near fatal respiratory illness, an event the family believes to be related to fumes from blasting at the mine.

The family now purchase their drinking water and the children are only allowed to play outside when the wind blows from the south – a respite that will be lost if the Spur Hill mine goes ahead.

While he understands the proponents of the Spur Hill mine are keen to buy his property, Mr Blake refuses to talk to them, and says he's holding on for the sake of protecting "some of the best farmland in the country".

"This land has been farmed by my family for more than a century because it's the best, but once it's mined, that's gone."

The water in the adjacent Hunter River is heavily polluted by the mines, affected by waste water heavy with salt and other contaminants that the mine is allowed to discharge into the river. Along with cattle, Mr Blake farms fish, but if he puts water from the river into his fish tanks, the fish are "dead within three days".

"We used to drink that water when I was a kid. Now it's full of salt, and it's black. That's got to come from the mines."

In addition to the health burden, Mr Blake says it's the additional costs associated with mining that must be borne by local communities and families that he objects to.

“We’ve got to buy water. Pay more for electricity because the kids can’t go outside in the summer and have to have the air con on. Buy extra filters for the fish. Pay extra health bills. These are because of mining, mining by international companies, whose profits don’t even stay in this country. Why should we pay?”

Mr Blake’s son Wayne is deeply concerned about the health of his own and other children and the impact of mining on the future of other industries in the Valley.

“My kids are always sick – they always have throat infections, respiratory problems, coughs and so on. They always need their [asthma] puffers, always have runny noses.”

The source, according to Mr Blake, is the dust from overburden at the adjacent mine and from the coal preparation plant across the river. In his view it has been getting steadily worse for the last five years (the mine has been operating for six years).

He believes poor regulation of the industry has led to the towns of Muswellbrook, Singleton and Denman being ‘over-populated’ with coal mines, and that the government is on the side of miners, not the community.

“The recent events at Bentley [where community protests led to the removal of Metgasco’s exploration licence to drill for coal seam gas due to insufficient community consultation] show the community is sick and tired of the government not telling the truth, and failing to act in the community interest. It is not a level playing field for the community against mining companies and the government,” he said.

Mr Blake sees little regard also for the longer term, leaving him concerned about the future of the region.

“We rely on the agriculture industry to feed us, but you can’t regenerate land damaged by mining to grow food.”

“What happens to the Hunter Valley after mining?” he asks.