Hello, my name is Kate Davidson. I am a farmer, and although outside the affectation zone the approval of this project will affect my life and the business of our family due to what it represents. The fate of this mine will be a hallmark decision with regard to the State’s land use debate and policy; a watershed decision with either the potential of setting a precedent that values highly fertile and productive agricultural land over extractive industries, or alternatively of setting the precedent of destroying highly productive agricultural land.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, this project just cannot be considered only in its currently proposed form; this decision will have a huge impact on every single landholder of the Liverpool Plains. A decision to mine at Watermark is a wilful decision to make uncertain the future use of every hectare of the Liverpool Plains that harbours either coal or gas under the rich soils on the slopes and plains alike. This will make it extremely difficult for us to confidently run businesses and invest the capital, time and indeed love, it requires to run a sustainable farming operation.

This is the wrong mine in the wrong place.

The technicalities of water and other models have been debated – the probables and the possibles. The work that has been done to date is at best inconclusive. The impacts on ground water and agriculture are not conclusive. So, the fact remains that the risks to our soils and water, and I say “our” meaning all Australians, is real. The question as to whether or not there will be damage has never been posed – it has always been how much? This mine plan does not come with a 100% guarantee that our natural resources will not be harmed. And, in the event of damage, nor does it come with a legislated and well enforced liability held to those who do damage.

Approval of this project is approving the potential damage of Australia’s very best farming land and water as an “acceptable risk”. The distribution of risk in this scenario is simply wrong and is not acceptable.

Commissioners, you now have the opportunity to apply the precautionary principle. Although I am sure you are more than familiar with the term, it seems to have become lost or perhaps ignored in this process. I would like to draw on several excerpts from a WHO publication:

“At the core of the precautionary principle lies the intuitively simple idea that decision-makers should act in advance of scientific certainty to protect the environment ~~(and with it the well-being interests of future generations)~~ from incurring harm. It demands that humans take care of themselves, their descendants and the life-preserving processes that nurture their existence.” Pg31

“In the context of sustainable development, although the principle of precaution does not state how various environmental and economic factors should be traded off, it strongly suggests that a strenuous search be conducted for alternative modes of development ~~that minimize discharges and waste products, regardless of whether they are known to have harmful effects~~, on the basis that prevention is often, ~~though not always,~~ more cost-effective than cure.” Pg32-33

“As with all guiding principles, the precautionary principle carries its own values. The principle is based on recognizing that people have a responsibility to prevent harm and to preserve the natural foundations of life, now and into the future. The needs of future generations of people and other species and the integrity of ecosystems are recognized as being worthy of care and respect. A precautionary approach asks how much harm can be avoided rather than asking how much is acceptable. It acknowledges that the world comprises complex, interrelated systems that are vulnerable to harm from human activities and resistant to full understanding. Precaution gives priority to protecting these vulnerable systems and requires gratitude, empathy, restraint, humility, respect and compassion.” Pg 66

“Democracy itself is poorly suited to this time scale, with its heavy political biases in favour of immediate gratification and gain today rather than tomorrow.” Pg 32

This final statement, I believe, is the heart of this current dilemma. Time frames and processes have been geared in favour of the proponent throughout the duration of this application. Where the burden of proving safety should fall on the proponent, they are given endless opportunities to manufacture information to confirm what has already been somewhat assumed; that is, that the project can be safe. The burden of critiquing and therefore validating Shenhua’s information has fallen on us. This community has poured hundreds of thousands of dollars and endless hours into justifying, across a range of disciplines, what we know intuitively to be potential harm. Indeed the science alone has given us more than enough proof to know that in this case the precautionary principle should be exercised to protect the sustainable agricultural assets of this region; assets that have the long term competitive advantage of climate, geography, fertile soils and proximity to market.

THAT cumulative impacts should not be considered in this application is disgraceful. To simply cite an object of concern as outside the scope of the terms of reference is accepting ignorance as defence for allowing real harm to occur. While this course of action may well fall within the written parameters of this process, it is not good enough to justify wrong decisions because such a decision falls within the rules. Societies, environments, economies, markets and indeed life itself, are just not that simple. Use of “the real world as a laboratory” – this is not acceptable and would be a mistake. A very, very big one. The precautionary principle should be our guide in these decisions.

You have the opportunity to sure up the future of Australia’s prime agricultural lands, our futures and indeed the respect and value that is shown to the agricultural industry more broadly.

Please use it responsibly and wisely. Make the right choice for not just the Australians of the next few decades, but for the next century. This is the wrong mine in the wrong place.

Reference:

The precautionary principle: protecting public health, the environment and the future of our children

WHO, 2004