

Mines and wines in Australia climate battle

August 2 2010, by Amy Coopes

Australian winemaker Brett Keating doesn't draw a parallel between the shorter, hotter seasons and slow creep of coal mining towards his land, but he is concerned.

"This is a community that's benefited greatly from mining over the years, it's brought a lot of prosperity to the area," he explains.

"We've coexisted with mining for years but in the last couple of years we just feel like the balance has flipped."

His Hunter Valley winery, Two Rivers, just outside Denman north of Sydney, has been in his family for generations, flanked by the World Heritage-listed Wollemi National Park, one of Australia's largest wilderness areas.

But Keating says coal miners are slowly hemming in on the upper Hunter's vineyards, buying growers out for exploration as the industry seeks to keep up with raging global and domestic demand.

"I'm told that the Hunter Valley will double its coal production and existing mining footprint in the next two years," he told AFP.

"We recognise that mining's got to exist and we're not against mining as such, but more mines are creeping closer and we're really concerned about that."

Nowhere are the tensions of Australia's looming environment versus

economy election more apparent than in the Hunter, a "wines and mines" region just a few hours from Sydney.

For every three wineries there is one coal mine, and Australia's three largest power stations burn up to 20 million tons of coal every year in the Hunter, supplying several million homes with power.

[Australia](#) is the world's worst per capita polluter, and electricity generation accounts for about one-third of the country's [greenhouse emissions](#), which last year reached an equivalent 537 million tonnes of CO₂.

Some of the country's biggest [coal mines](#) are in the Hunter region, with BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and Xstrata projects connected by rail to Newcastle Harbour, the world's largest coal export port.

Hundreds of ships leave there every year for Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China and India, and Australia is the world's number one exporter of coal, last year accounting for a 28 percent share of the global market.

Former prime minister Kevin Rudd won a landslide 2007 election victory on a pro-green platform which saw him ratify the Kyoto Protocol and take a lead role at last year's failed climate talks in Copenhagen.

His decision to shelve an emissions trading scheme which was twice rejected by lawmakers sent his popularity into such a spin the ruling Labor party dumped him in a shock coup favouring his female deputy, Julia Gillard.

Gillard vowed action on a carbon tax when she took office, but was criticised as going soft on climate change with an election policy to seek advice from the community and not act ahead of other major economies.

Hunter-based activist group Rising Tide dumped a truckload of coal outside when Gillard made her first address to the National Press Club as leader, and rejects her claim that there isn't public consensus for climate action.

"I think in the wider Australian community there's a lot more people that are willing to really put themselves on the line and get themselves arrested, mainstream Australians," said Rising Tide's Annika Dean.

"We've organised actions where there's hundreds of people getting arrested, 50 people coming to block a coal train ranging from 80 years old to 20 years old, a really broad age range and broad backgrounds of people."

Fellow activist Ned Haughton said the wider climate change debate had allowed people in the Hunter to start talking about the negative impacts of mining and there was definite momentum for grassroots action.

"This is where the root cause of it all is, and someone has to do something at the source," Haughton said.

A 2009 study into industrial air pollution in the upper Hunter said a "lack of political will and regulatory inertia" had prevented meaningful official action on the health risks of both open-cut mining and coal power generation.

The Newcastle University study also said "interdependence of state government and corporations in reaping the economic benefits of [coal production](#) and export" was to blame.

But one of the study's authors, Linda Connor, agreed with Haughton that Hunter residents were becoming more active and demanding greater accountability from the government and corporations on emissions.

"Even if people reject political radicalism, they will mobilise around specific issues of concern ... most notably threats to land, property values and livelihood and health," Connor said.

"The net effect is a sustained shift in civil society. Shifts in political processes will inevitably come from this," she added.

A survey of 7,000 Australians published this week found an overwhelming majority wanted emissions trading plans to start now and without action from other countries, with relatively high emissions cuts to be achieved by 2020.

"We've got such majority public support to start now, not to wait for what China and the US does, to make deep cuts," said survey author Jordan Louviere.

Keating said opinion was divided among winegrowers about whether changes to the region's climate were permanent or part of normal cycles, admitting there was "some scepticism out there in some quarters."

"I think (attitudes) have changed dramatically," he said.

"Everybody's realising that we've got to have a sustainable industry. I think there's recognition that you have to do something."

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