

“Water is life—where there is water there is life.” These were the words that stood out to me as I scanned hours of video footage brought back to my office from Southern Sudan earlier this year. The words were from the leader of a water drilling team who was celebrating the successful installation of a hand pump driven well in the remote village of Wungop in the Warup region.

While water brings life, competing interests in a dwindling water supply can also bring death. In 2007 the World Bank vice president for the environment Ismail Serageldin warned, “Many of the wars of the 20th century were about oil, but wars of the 21st century will be over water.” The Pacific Institute has documented 35 significant international conflicts over water in the 1990s and 49 in the period leading up to 2007.

Closer to home a number of food producers in our region have great concerns over the impact of mining on water supplies. In June of this year I joined a bus trip that visited a number of farms on the Darling Downs affected by mining and the coal seam gas industry. The visit left me inspired by the hospitality and determination of the farmers and also pondering a number of questions. A paper produced for the Western Downs Regional Council estimates that 280000 million litres of water would need to be extracted annually as part of the extraction of coal seam gas. Where does this water go? What are the effects of this process on the Great Artesian Bore and other aquifers? What will be done with the estimated 54 million tonnes of salt waste produced? Last week BTEX – a mixture of the chemicals benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene was found around eight coal seam gas wells near Miles. The state government told us not to be too concerned and environment minister Tony Burke went ahead and approved Coal Seam Gas developments in the Surat and Bowen Basin.

In the Felton Valley just 30 km from Toowoomba city a proposed 2500 hectare open cut coal mine will require 8000 megalitres of water a year. Local growers fear the impact of the mine on aquifers and Hodgson Creek. They are concerned that solid waste from the mine may eventually find its way into the water table. If it does, the company responsible could be just a distant memory.

In his approval of future Coal Seam Gas developments Federal Minister Burke rightly acknowledges that the impact on ground water is critical. In a statement to the media he identified the CSG companies as those responsible for protecting ground water. To my mind the issue of water is far too important to be left to the self-monitoring of resource companies. Queensland Farmer’s Federation Dan Gilligan is right when he says that rapid expansion of the coal seam gas industry is outpacing science and planning – especially when it comes to water.

One of the criticisms of the recent Murray Darling Basin plan is that it partly adheres to the ideology of market rationalism – where water is only valued as a tradable good to be sold to the highest bidder. Water cannot be treated as just another commodity. Traditionally water has been governed by public agencies as it is rightly seen as a public good. The right to water is a human right and any discussion of how we use and protect and conserve it cannot be reduced to an economic argument. Investment and the economy rely on an element of risk. When it comes to water however the risk should be taken off the table. Whether it’s mining, whether it’s

agriculture, whether it is urban sprawl the cost of getting it wrong with H<sub>2</sub>O is too high a price to pay. Without water all life is threatened.