

Researchers raise alarm on coal seam gas threat to Australia's richest farmland

ABC Rural / By [David Chen](#) and [Alys Marshall](#)

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Farmer Wayne Newton says his land is being put at risk by ongoing CSG developments.

(ABC Rural: Alys Marshall)

For fifth-generation grazier Wayne Newton, Europe's gas troubles should be a world away, but a new boom in mining exploration could bring the crisis right to his farm gate.

His grandfather first moved to the Westerns Downs district in Queensland in 1935 from New South Wales in search of land to expand the family business.

But the Kupunn farmer now fears for his grandchildren's future on the farm, as he grapples with the massive expansion of the coal seam gas industry that experts warn could cause irreversible environmental damage.

"You just shake your head that something that can keep producing grain and fibre for almost forever could be put at risk by a short-term industry like coal seam gas," Mr Newton says.

Short-term gain, long-term damage

The region is no stranger to coal seam gas developments, with large-scale projects beginning in the late 1990s.

But a new wave of investment, worth billions of dollars and driven by demand in Europe and Asia, could threaten the future of the area touted as Australia's richest farmland.

A new report, published last month in the journal Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland, has found the more than 22,000 wells planned for the region could cause irreversible damage.



There is a risk the new gas wells could cause land subsidence similar to a sinkhole. (ABC Rural: Alys Marshall)

One of the report's authors, University of Queensland associate professor Peter Dart says the most damage is in subsidence.

He says subsidence, where changes to aquifers and coal seams underground cause the land to fall away, was something that "you cannot recover from".

Dr Dart says those changes could then alter the natural flow of floodwater on the floodplains and fertile-river flats of the Western Downs.

"It impacts the way that these farms manage their [regular] floods and the way they irrigate their crops," Dr Dart says.

"Damage, in a sense, is inestimable."



Dr Dart says the damage from coal seam gas wells could be irreversible. (ABC News: Alice Pavlovic)

Mr Newton says he is fighting to keep the gas companies off his land, despite several wells being drilled at angles under his property without his permission.

"It's David versus Goliath. They've got enormous resources both just people on the ground and even their legal people for instance," he says.

He says if the land sunk, its effect on his farming infrastructure would be devastating.

"The [wells] are going to have a very dramatic negative effect ... who knows, it could cause the failure of a ring tank when it's full at some time."



Wayne Newton and his family have farmed at Kupunn for decades. (ABC Rural: Alys Marshall)

Exploration driving wealth

Local businesses are reaping the benefits of the new boom, with hundreds of construction jobs expected to be created.

"The energy sector is absolutely going off. I don't think there's any other word you can call it," Toowoomba and Surat Basin Enterprise's Lance MacManus said

"We have a very big service sector for the gas sector in our region. It's one of our core pillars."

And with what the Queensland Resources Council (QRC) described as "unsatisfiable" demand globally, investment into the gas industry is expected to continue.

QRC chief executive Ian Macfarlane says the war in Ukraine has forced Europe to reassess its gas supply, with the continent now turning towards Australia.

"We're now seeing potentially cargo supplied out of Australia into Europe for the long term," he says.



Ian Macfarlane says the global demand for gas is unsatisfiable. (Supplied: QRC)

Coexistence?

Gas companies have promised "genuine coexistence" with farmers concerned about the gas industry's expansion on the Western Downs.

Mr Macfarlane says the industry is a massive driver of wealth for the entire region, including farmers.

"Farmers are earning hundreds of thousands of dollars a year with no effort, no tax and no risk from the coal seam gas wells on their properties," he says.

"Where the coexistence model fails, we work together to fix it."



Land on the Western Downs is some of the richest agricultural land in Australia. (ABC Rural: Alys Marshall)

But Mr Newton says it is a bad deal.

"Coexistence is basically where both parties either benefit or at least no party goes backwards," he says.

"But I think in the area here, we're going to see parties go backwards and I'm talking about the land holders."

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