



CONCERNED: Coolmore's Tom Magnier (left) and Michael Kirwan are unhappy with coal-mining plans in the Hunter Valley.

AT THE COALFACE

Hunter breeders in mines battle

The big names of Australian breeding are fighting mining projects that threaten the future of the famous Hunter Valley as a thoroughbred nursery. JESSICA OWERS reports.

It was controversial down to the day it was announced. On Christmas Eve 2008, an Exploration Licence (EL) for coal mining was granted for Doyle's Creek in the horse-rich Hunter Valley. The 2778-hectare site, which proposed to operate year-round, 24 hours a day, extracting 110 million tonnes of coal over 21 years, sat on the cusp of Wollemi National Park and the village of Jerry's Plains. But that wasn't all. About 15 per cent of it sat under Coolmore Stud.

"Rest assured, we will fight fiercely to protect this property from the advancing coal

mines that threaten us," said Coolmore's Tom Magnier more than three years down the line. Since Christmas 2008, the Irish giants and Darley, Arrowfield, the Hunter Thoroughbred Breeders' Association (HTBA) and its allied studs, and local farmers, residents and business owners, have waged a mighty war against the EL.

"It would be a crying shame if the NSW Government allows the Doyle's Creek coal mine to proceed for short-term gain. At risk are the livelihoods of veterinarians, feed suppliers, farriers, transport companies,

and the thousands of people involved in our multi-billion dollar industry," Magnier said.

The owner of the project, NuCoal, is considering above- and below-ground Hunter River crossings to move coal from the Doyle's Creek site when it is operational. The project overview, which was released to the Australian Stock Exchange earlier this year and which is the first stage of the approval application process, highlighted major environmental risks for the area, including draw-down on underground water, substantial greenhouse emissions from

coal seams and, importantly, subsidence. In isolation, any of these factors would affect horse breeding. Together, they could spell an exodus of breeders.

"If we left, I think we would probably not be the only farm to leave the Valley," Magnier said.

The united front of the Hunter's major horse farms has been impressive. Darley Australia's general manager Henry Plumtre has been a face in the campaign since the outset. "The Hunter Valley holds the second largest concentration of horse studs in the world, outside Kentucky," he said.

"It produces approximately half of all thoroughbreds born annually in Australia. The negative encroachment from mining activity is threatening our industry. It will impact on the health and welfare of our employees and livestock, and the sustainability of our region and its environment."

Hellen Georgopoulos, of HTBA, has been tireless in her organisation's opposition to the Doyle's Creek EL. "The community, and our industry, is looking for signals from the government that it is prepared to act to protect our prime agricultural lands, industries and vital water systems," she said.

The HTBA is calling for a special commission of inquiry into how the licence, along with one at Ferndale, eight kilometres from Denman, was granted. "There seems to be something seriously amiss here and the public deserves to know how these licences were granted, who stands to gain from them and at what cost to our world-class breeding industry," Georgopolous said.

The relevant authorities are at least listening. The NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) is investigating the issuing of the Doyle's Creek Exploration Licence. In breach of departmental guidelines, the licence was granted in 2008 by the then Labor Resources Minister Ian Macdonald without a tender process.

"No decisions should be made with respect to this mining proposal until ICAC concludes its investigation, but our position on it is clear. It should not proceed," Georgopoulos said.