



## **Avonbank Story**

4<sup>th</sup> May 2025

The soils of the Wimmera are classified as fragile. But the families that farm this land are not. The generational farmers that have continued to live and work here are resilient, innovative, and constantly contributing to improving their land as well as the communities they live amongst. The richest resource that this country has is its farmers and their worth is being squandered.

Sitting beneath the hundred-year-old Johns farmhouse in Dooen is a wealth of minerals. The minerals that are powering the ‘green transition,’ according to the *Victorian Critical Minerals Roadmap- Resources for Net Zero*. Zircon, Titanium, Ilmenite, Monazite (Uranium and Thorium) and Xenotime which includes Dysprosium and Terbium. These are the highly sought after mineral sands that are found across the Wimmera and Mallee region of Victoria and South Australia.

Talk of minerals sands did not get much attention across the broader Horsham community in the early 1990’s when test drilling was being conducted. No one ever considered that more than 30 years later the region would be labelled as the ‘Saudi Arabia’ of minerals sands deposits. Chris Johns, who was then in his 20’s, says that “at the time, all we really knew was that there was a pilot mining operation out near Drung/St Helens Plains, to be completely honest we had no idea what was involved.” But now Chris, his wife Donna, and their children are standing up to WIM Resource, a company that is just a few steps away from getting approval to dig up *Weeroona*, their generational farm.

In 2014 Chris found out that there was a mining retention licence on his entire property, innocuously called “Avonbank”. But it was not until April of 2023 that WIM Resource put their Environmental Effects Statement (EES) up for public exhibit. The Johns family were completely overwhelmed by the enormity of the documentation, over 6000 pages, which they had just four weeks to respond to.

Chris and Donna explained “It wasn’t really until after the EES that we started to comprehend what was involved. The mining company never really went into much detail with us personally, they were only concerned about getting us to sign a land acquisition compensation agreement.”

“You need a science degree to learn about mining for these rare earth minerals, radiation, hydrology, or geology. The average person would not know what monazite is, let alone dysprosium and terbium. We now know that monazite contains uranium and

thorium-radioactive material. This is when we became alarmed of the risks to our family and the wider community from radioactive dust, silica, and radon gases.”

“We had to educate ourselves and try to comprehend documents provided in the EES. What concerns us is the fact that the mining company are the only ones who provide the data for the EES. This is not done independently.”

In Victoria, a landholder owns the topsoil that they live on. But the minerals underneath is the property of the state. A mining company must first apply for an exploration licence (EL) to assess the mineral deposits, then apply for a retention license (RL) to buy enough time to prove that this piece of land is economically viable for a mining licence (ML) and work plan. If they can prove to the planning minister that the mine is viable, and that they are a fit company that has the capacity, and shareholder backing to successfully drill, then they will be granted permission.

The Victorian landholder is given three options; sell their farm to the mining company, lease the land to the company for the term of the mining licence or have their land compulsorily acquired. Unlike other states, Victorian farmers do not have the power of veto.

In 2023 a planning scheme amendment to VC242 was gazetted as part of Victoria's efforts to streamline planning provisions. This amendment specifically adds Clause 53.22 regarding significant economic development, it expedites approvals for specific large-scale developments aimed at bolstering the economy. In a state where the phrase ‘fast-track’ has been applied to more than one planning legislation there is a sense of urgency and power at play.

Donna Johns told us that “the mining of a WIM style deposits has never occurred in Victoria before, so basically the ‘Avonbank,’ ‘Donald (DMS) and ‘Goschen’ [located near Swan Hill] projects are test pilots for future mining of this type. The ‘Avonbank’ project will be open-cut mining of 400ha, all at one time, up to 35 metres deep. There has been no successful rehabilitation of our soil type in Australia, let alone the world. We seriously question what WIM Resource has stated about their rehabilitation of the test-pit.”

To add insult to injury WIM Resource, has not yet conducted a full mining operation in Australia that we know of. Its ownership structure is not fully disclosed. It is listed as an Australian Private Company but is not listed on the Australian Stock Exchange.



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Surprisingly, the Federal Government delegate gave their approval of the 'Avonbank' EPBC Act application just last month, whilst in caretaker mode, leading up to the election.

Concerningly, 'Avonbank' is situated less than 2km



from grain exporters Viterria and hay exporters Johnson Ashai, the SCT freight terminal, and a new potato processing business-Farm Fritz, as well as Longernong Agriculture College. Adjoining the mining license area are the townships of Dooen and Jung and only a further 8 kilometres away is the rural city of Horsham with a population of over twenty thousand people. Only now, with more raised awareness are the people of the district becoming more alarmed at the potential health risks this poses. In April of this year Resources Victoria asked for public comment and objections on the 'Avonbank' mine, and they had 830 submissions. The Horsham Rural City Council has now revoked its memorandum of understanding with WIM Resources. The slow push by the Johns family, and the advocacy of Mine Free Wimmera Farms, has shone a spotlight on the long-term implications of the project for the broader community.

WIM Resource has advised the Johns family that all their land will be required for the mining project.

Chris stated that "This farm has been in the Johns' family since 1884. There will also be other Johns families impacted by this mining project. Our son is a sixth-generation Johns farmer. We will not be able to live in the farmhouse due to toxic dust, noise, and vibration. This will be for the life of the mining project which is 36 years. If we need access to the farm, we will need to apply for an escort to enter our farm to check our home and machinery sheds."

Donna said, "Where are we going to move to that doesn't have an exploration or retention licence on it? Where can we farm and know that this won't happen again?"

Whilst the Johns family home will not be demolished by the proposed mine, the place where a Johns family member's ashes have been interred will be.

Chris said, "We settled this land and made it what it is today and to have it stated that there is no cultural significance is upsetting. To us there is. My family treats this farm as our spiritual home, a place of being safe and welcomed. As with every home there are monuments... a spike placed on the top of a strainer post that was used as a sundial for over a hundred years, trees planted after the war to remind us of the supreme sacrifice

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our forefathers made, so that we could live the at 'Weeroona' in peace and harmony. The total disregard for this is gut wrenching. 'Weeroona' is our family home, it has been for 140 years. The smell of a Sunday roast or morning scones...the sounds of laughter from the veranda... showing our visitors how proud we are of our home and the achievements we have made with the farm... the farm that we cherish and have devoted our lives to. We want to maintain the farming legacy for the next generation of Johns, but that is now likely to be taken away from us."

The Johns family encourage everyone to become more educated on mineral sands mining and the lack of property rights that landholders have in Victoria. Donna says that "Farmers need to have the right to VETO. The EES process is biased towards the proponent. The IAC hearing panellists appear to have very little understanding of agricultural farming in the Wimmera. Farmers should be entitled to seek free legal and expert representation for the EES process, how can a farmer defend his right to farm when the mining company engages internationally renowned lawyers?"

Chris and Donna concluded that "Farmers are not respected by our government. The government appears to want mining more than agriculture. Don't let these mining and renewable companies divided our strong rural communities with their tokenisms of sponsorships and donations."

Farming is sustainable. Mining is not. Agriculture in the Wimmera contributes \$800 million per annum to the state and federal economy and employs over 12,000 people. Families like the Johns have contributed to this success. Our state needs to value our farming families now, and into the future.