

Vignerons' plea on coal gas

Protection 'promise'

By **FRANCES THOMPSON**

HUNTER wine industry leaders say they hold Premier Barry O'Farrell accountable for a "promise" they said he made before the 2011 election to protect vineyards by removing them from coal seam gas exploration areas.

Hunter Valley Wine Industry Association president Andrew Margan said the verbal assurance was made during a formal meeting with Mr O'Farrell, Nationals leader Andrew Stoner, present Planning Minister Brad Hazzard and Environment Minister Robyn Parker in November 2010.

"A number of promises were made at the meeting: money to fix Broke and McDonald roads [in the vineyards] ... and to excise coal seam gas out of declared areas of viticulture in the Lower Hunter," Mr Margan said.

Pokolbin and Broke Fordwich vineyards are covered by gas explorer AGL's petroleum exploration licence 267.

The company has applied for a renewal, which is due on January 19.

"We want these areas protected," Mr Margan said.

"Mr O'Farrell is in charge, he made the promise and he is the one we hold accountable," he said.

The NSW Department of Primary Industries has already identified as



ASSURANCE: Hunter Valley Wine Industry Association president Andrew Margan.

"viticulture strategic agricultural land" most of the areas the vignerons want excised.

The *Newcastle Herald* asked the offices of Premier O'Farrell and Mr Hazzard, Tourism Minister and member for the Upper Hunter George Souris and Mr Stoner for a response to the claimed protection promise.

An emailed statement from Resources Minister Chris Hartcher said AGL's licence over the vineyards had not yet been renewed.

The licence would be assessed by the NSW government "through its commitment to implement a strategic regional land use policy".

Mr Margan said the government's strategic land use planning process was pointless if prime vineyards had exploration licences over them.

Vigneron Bruce Tyrrell was at the meeting and said assurances were given.