

Online questionnaire report: Inquiry into the Petroleum (Onshore) Amendment (Cancellation of Zombie Petroleum Exploration Licences) Bill 2021

As part of its inquiry into the Petroleum (Onshore) Amendment (Cancellation of Zombie Petroleum Exploration Licences) Bill 2021, Portfolio Committee No. 4 – Industry launched an online questionnaire to enable public participation in an efficient and accessible way.

The questionnaire was not intended as a statistically valid, random survey. Like the submission process, respondents self-selected in choosing to participate. This means that respondents were not a representative sample of the New South Wales population, but rather interested members of the public who volunteered their time to have a say. The questionnaire was complementary to and did not replace the usual submission process. The submission portal was also available to individuals and organisations who wished to provide a more detailed response to the inquiry's terms of reference. In this regard, some respondents may have completed the questionnaire and also made a submission.

The questionnaire asked respondents for their position on the Petroleum (Onshore) Amendment (Cancellation of Zombie Petroleum Exploration Licences) Bill 2021 and their views on the issue.

The full list of questions is at Appendix 1.

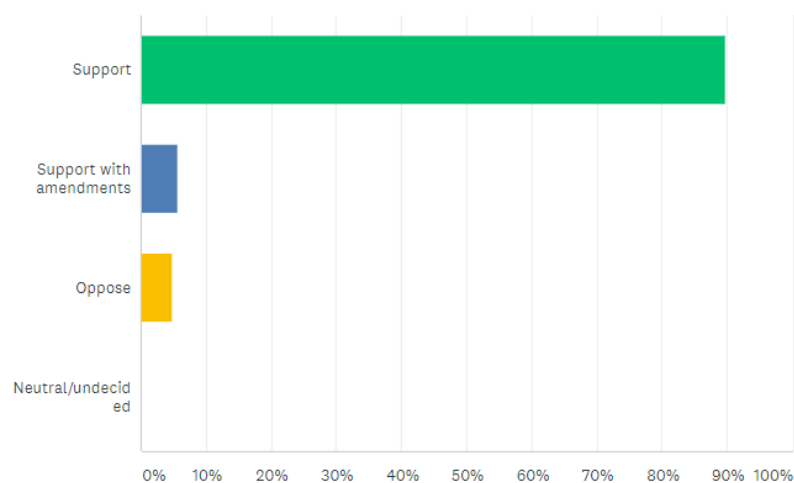
Responses to questions

The questionnaire was open from 18 May 2021 to 15 June 2021 and received 128 responses. A sample of answers and summaries of responses are provided for each question below. The samples have been selected to represent the various viewpoints expressed in the responses.

What is your position on the Petroleum (Onshore) Amendment (Cancellation of Zombie Petroleum Exploration Licences) Bill 2021?

An overwhelming number of respondents (89.68%) supported the bill. Some respondents (5.56%) supported the bill with amendments. Although some respondents (4.76%) selected that they opposed the bill, their responses to the qualitative questions indicate that they support the cancellation of zombie petroleum exploration licences.

Answered: 126 Skipped: 2



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Support	89.68% 113
Support with amendments	5.56% 7
Oppose	4.76% 6
Neutral/undecided	0.00% 0
TOTAL	126

In relation to the previous question, please explain your position on the bill.

All respondents supported cancelling expired Petroleum Exploration Licences (PELs), citing the following reasons: the protection of businesses, jobs, farms and land; environmental and health concerns; and the view that if a licence expires it should cease to exist.

Most respondents expressed concerns about farmers' lack of certainty over their property, businesses and jobs, as well as the potential damage caused to land and water as a result of these licences.

- "I feel that this bill should be supported as farmers are frequently placed in a stressful position over long periods of time not knowing whether their land is going to be

compromised or harmed by mining companies or not. This ongoing uncertainty also creates unnecessary stress and division in many regional communities."

- "I support this Bill as it will give landholders and Farmers who live in the areas of these Zombie PELs, certainty about future land use, if the zombie PELs are cancelled."
- "I believe the land and underground resources should be left intact so the work of our farmers is not compromised. Overseas experiences of underground exploration have proven to be detrimental to the land and agricultural industries. In Australia, we need to preserve our resources for food production. Water is a particularly valuable resource and we cannot afford to see it being depleted by mining operations."
- "Living and farming in an area that is within the PEL area creates constant uncertainty about our future business of growing various grains. As the various mining companies have failed to renew licences or work these areas it makes so much sense to cancel these PELs so that we farmers can get on with our work of producing food and fibre for the world market."
- "My family are farmers in the Tambar Springs district that rely on our underground water via these precious aquifers that will be affected by any CSG [Coal Seam Gas] activity in the GAB [Great Artesian Basin] and in the Gunnedah district covered by PELs 1 and 12. We do not need this gas, the government has continuously ignored the people of the NW [North West] of the state. These expired PELs have been inactive and if the government followed the correct process they would no longer exist. They also pre date the chief scientist recommendations. Our businesses have been put on hold for far too long. If our government representatives truly represent their constituents we would have had these ghastly PELs removed from our beautiful productive Liverpool Plains many years ago."
- "I live and farm food and fibre less than 6km downstream from Santos' Narrabri Gas Project. Retaining or renewing these so-called zombie licences is not in the interests of NSW nor is it in the interests of the local communities and economies over which such licences persist. The persistence of such licences is a cause of significant distress and anxiety for the rural communities over which they lie. Development of these zombie PELs also risks not only land and water resources but sustainable farming futures ..."
- "The Zombie exploration licences are like a dark cloud hanging over farmers and rural communities. Not a welcome dark rain cloud, but a cloud of uncertainty as to the future viability of farming and of the precious water resources in those areas still subject to inactive licences ..."
- "In Queensland communities where coal seam gas fields have existed there have been net job losses in those regional communities. Even SANTOS in their submissions to the IPC [Independent Planning Commission] for the recent Narrabri Gas Project stated that their project would result in a small net job loss for the Moree/ Narrabri region ... These PELs will result in conflicts with our current sustainable and growing industries and are in conflict with the desires of our people, from Gamilaroi people to our newest residents, they also do not fit into the future vision and development plans of our Shire and its community. Please support the Petroleum (Onshore) Amendment (Cancellation of Zombie Petroleum Exploration Licences) Bill 2021."

- "My position is that exploration licences leave land owners in a position of uncertainty. This uncertainty should be ended not left open to extension after extension ..."
- "Farmers and communities need to have the uncertainty around these licences removed. It would give the security of knowing that groundwater sources will be protected from further CSG mining. Gas companies should not be able to reactivate these licences at their convenience after years of inactivity."
- "Land owners should have the certainty of knowing their land will not be damaged once a licence expires."
- "I think it is important that zombie PELs are extinguished so that farmers can move forward with planning. Currently the uncertainty is stopping land holders from being able to make informed decisions about their future, and affecting land prices..."
- "The Moree Plains Shire has a high value and sustainable industry: agriculture. Viable agricultural industries and any further expansion, exploration or commercial extraction of gas are incompatible. Increase in the gas industry must end if agriculture is to survive."
- "There is a reason for a PEL to expire after 6 years, which is to provide procedural fairness for landowners. If no exploration has taken place within this time, then landowners have a right to be able to get on with their business plans for development of their land. The fact that these PELs aren't cancelled even after years of inaction on the PEL-holder's part makes a mockery of the legislation and denies the landholders procedural fairness. This situation has taken a huge toll on rural mental health. These farmers know that CSG mining on their land spells death to their hopes of developing their farm in a healthy, sustainable way..."
- "Coal Seam Gas (CSG) exploration and mining has no place in Australia, much less on agricultural land. The damage CSG can and often causes to ground water and ecologies is well documented from extensive damage which has occurred in places like the US, but there are Australian examples as well. Australia does NOT need more gas and definitely no CSG..."

A number of respondents were concerned with the licences' potential effects on climate change and argued for the need to move towards renewable energy sources.

- "Petroleum products are fossil fuels which produce dangerous carbon and other emissions driving damaging climate change. Petroleum products must be phased out and no further development of new fossil fuel resources must be allowed, to avoid reaching a tipping point and irreversible climate change. These exploration licenses must all be extinguished immediately and no more granted...."
- "We need to safeguard against worsening climate change by rapidly phasing out the use of fossil fuels. Cancelling zombie petroleum exploration licences will reduce the risk of a) allowing more fossil fuels to be extracted and ultimately burnt, worsening climate change and b) creating liabilities for Australia related to fossil fuel companies wishing to explore for petroleum based on holding an non-cancelled licence."

- "We need to think smarter, both in terms of energy supply and environmental protection. Petroleum and gas are yesterday's technologies and the underground water table is too precious to put at risk given its critical value to agriculture. Moreover, the Liverpool Plain contains some of the most productive land in the country and must be safeguarded ... Proponents should be encouraged to think beyond yesterday's industries and decide how they will contribute to Australia's urgent need to reduce carbon emission, fast-track alternative energy sources, protect the environment and enhance safe food production.
- "Fossil fuel exploration and use, needs to be phased out as soon as possible and renewable energy utilised instead. Our generation must look to leaving the planet in a better, not worse, condition for the generations to come. There are already enough resources available and new ones (e.g. methane from sewerage) to be explored further."
- "Methane is the main component of natural gas and CSG. It is one of several gases including carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and fluorinated gases that are all greenhouse gases. Opening up new gas fields will be in direct conflict to the NSW Governments Net Zero Plan Stage 1: 2020-2030 is the foundation for NSW's action on climate change and goal to reach net zero emissions by 2050. The Net Zero plan aims to grow the economy, create jobs and reduce emissions over the next decade ..."
- "NSW needs to move away from gas as fast as possible. The new IEA [International Energy Agency] Net Zero by 2050 report makes it very clear that no new gas projects are consistent with a safe climate. We have enough gas already. And we need to start using less and less until we get to net zero. This is one of the reasons I support cancellation of Zombie PELs and any legislation that takes us closer to this goal. CSG also threatens farmland, water, communities and health and is not supported by communities in the NSW NW. And we just don't need the gas. But we do need agriculture ... and groundwater ... and healthy, viable regional communities farming the land."
- "We need to focus on renewable energy in this era of climate change. These licences are not relevant any longer and should be abolished."

One respondent argued that the licences should be cancelled due to the health effects caused by CSG extraction.

- "I am a resident and small business owner in the township of Moree. I am a fifth generation of a farming/grazier family, with friends, clients and customers across a diverse cross-section of our community and the North West region... There are well documented health impacts for communities that live in the centre of gas fields and Moree township is surrounded by PELs that should be cancelled. When these PELs were allocated very little was known about the impacts of unconventional CSG extraction on the communities, aquifers and landscapes that host them. The experience in Queensland has shown that CSG has been devastating for communities left with a legacy of poor health outcomes and deaths for people and livestock, environmental damage including a loss of water pressure from bores, devalued properties, and more ... "

Some respondents believed that the term 'expired licence' should take its literal, plain language meaning and therefore be cancelled with no option for renewal.

- "I believe the expiry of an exploration license should see the licence revoked and any renewal should effectively see the licence application process start anew. Situations change, science and knowledge change, impacts of projects particularly cumulative effects add new parameters. Therefore new assessments must be made of the benefits and costs projects may bring. To have a licence effectively remain valid for ever is not beneficial to the people of NSW."
- "... It is an expectation that anything that is 'expired' is actually ended. So, for these PELs to be in some sort of limbo is odd and this has and will adversely affect any businesses that have these PELs hanging over them. As a resident who is affected by these PELs, I would like these cancelled as would be expected with something that is expired".
- "Once the licences have expired or are clearly unlikely to be renewed there appears to be no sense in not just getting rid of them and releasing these large swathes of land for farming, conservation or other useful purposes."
- "New permissions should be required, in line with the strong likelihood that there are changed circumstances that need to be newly considered since projects were approved."
- "A PEL should only remain in force when it being actively pursued within strict environmental guidelines. It should not simply sit on the books as a potential/possible future exploration opportunity. PELs should be short and active, and expire fully if not pursued."

Do you have any other comments on the bill?

Most respondents who answered this question reiterated the need to preserve farm land for agricultural purposes and to prevent harm to the environment.

- "I do not support Coal seam gas exploration in Australia particularly in one of its richest agricultural areas."
- "I believe that damage to the farming community, native flora and fauna is not a good trade for zombie gas fields and must be cancelled now."
- "Our farmland needs to be enriched, not destroyed. Efforts to enrich our soil with more mixed farming, more trees and care to keeping biodiversity alive. The whole eco-system is paramount to the survival of the human race."
- "... Reiterate that we should be using all of the powers we have, to slow and stop the use of all fossil fuels. Allowing companies to hold licences over land effectively in perpetuity, is contradictory to dealing with climate change and does support the agricultural industry that is so essential to our nation."
- "All fossil fuel developments must be cancelled if the world is to have a safe climate. Australia has already suffered enormous damage from recent droughts, fire and floods all

of which are driven by climate change. Development of further fossil fuel projects will only increase the risk and costs of more disasters this country will have to face."

- "These PELs proceed the chief scientists recommendations, we need that protection. Our beautiful productive Liverpool Plains and NW NSW needs common sense to prevail so for generations to come this land retains the ability to produce clean and wholesome food and fibre. Agricultural businesses that feed the nation should not be put in jeopardy over such an unwanted industry. Thank you for this opportunity to show support for this bill."

Some respondents expressed the view that these licences only seek to benefit the interests of the gas and oil industry.

- "The Bill closes a loophole that the gas lobbyists would not want closed as the loophole suits the gas and oil industry, interests and finances. The coal industry is basically a redundant asset today, and the gas industry is becoming a redundant industry very, very quickly..."
- "As a matter of national security and future economic management, we need to keep our resources for the benefit of Australians, not companies whose profits are sent offshore."

Appendix 1: List of questions

1. Please enter your contact details.

Name:

Email address:

Postcode:

2. Are you A resident of NSW? Select one of these options:
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

3. What is your position on the Petroleum (Onshore) Amendment (Cancellation of Zombie Petroleum Exploration Licences) Bill 2021?

In answering this question, please note that the object of this Bill is to amend the Petroleum (Onshore) Act 1991 as follows—(a) to provide that an exploration licence expires at the end of its term unless renewed, (b) to cancel exploration licences that remain in force because of a pending renewal application. Select one of these options:

- a. Support
 - b. Support with amendments
 - c. Oppose
 - d. Neutral/undecided
4. In relation to the previous question, please explain your position on the bill. *500 words – free text box*
 5. Do you have any other comments on the bill? *250 words – free text box*