

Submission
No 633

INQUIRY INTO COAL SEAM GAS

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SUBMISSION TO THE NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY INTO THE COAL SEAM GAS INDUSTRY

I call on the NSW government to introduce a permanent moratorium on the destructive practice of coal seam gas mining and to provide land holders with improved rights which will enable them to have more influence on what happens on their property.

Based on international evidence I am totally opposed to the mining of coal seam gas and particularly the destructive and polluting exploration process known as "fracking". It should not be permitted in New South Wales or indeed anywhere else in Australia.

There are thousands of well documented examples of irreversible adverse environmental outcomes caused by the polluting and invasive practices used for the exploration of coal gas mining. These examples have occurred both here in Queensland and overseas, particularly in the United States, and are irrefutable.

I will leave it for environmental experts to present this wealth of evidence to the inquiry. It should however provide a warning sufficiently clear to convince a responsible NSW government that it has no choice but to ban coal seam gas mining permanently in this state. If there are any possible doubts about adverse outcomes then it is vital that a thorough examination of the international evidence of irreversible environmental damage is undertaken by this inquiry. There can be no turning of a governmental blind eye to incontrovertible evidence.

This is arguably the most important issue facing the safety and long term health of the environment in Australia and it must certainly not be allowed to occur in NSW taken the current inadequate state of the science. It is not satisfactory that such dangerous environmental practices could be permitted simply because the mining industry can see a handsome profit and the government economic returns from mining royalties. Such financial benefits are in these circumstances quite illusory for government.

The effects of this industry on underground water resources and fragile ecosystems cannot be accurately predicted. As such these companies must no longer be allowed to embark on exploratory practices while there is any possibility of irreparable damage to agricultural land and aquifers. The NSW government must no longer play russian roulette with our most valuable resources, our agricultural land, our aquifers, our health, our safety and our atmosphere. The inter-generational wealth of our natural environment and the food security of the nation is far too important.

It is important to consider not only the potential effects of polluted aquifers and altered geology sub-strata but also the surface environment where whole tracts of agricultural land are torn up for intrusive pipelines, gas towers and access roads.

In addition there is a further risk of bushfire which coal seam gas mining poses taken its practice of releasing methane gas either through the mining process itself or through leaking by accident or negligence.

There are many regions of NSW where coal seam gas mining exploration has been given permission which are heavily forested with thousands of acres of sclerophyll trees and where bushfire risk is a serious issue. Large areas of the land are assessed as being at fire risk ranging from low through to high.

A responsible government would not even consider allowing the possibility of methane gas being released into a volatile cocktail of eucalyptus trees, inaccessible locations, heavy dry undergrowth and a rural population. The risk of bushfire should be sufficient reason alone to prevent coal seam gas being mined in such regions.

Despite assurances of 'best practice' from the mining companies we are constantly made aware that accidents happen as we have witnessed only recently with Orica in Newcastle. It should be remembered methane gas emission is a highly toxic greenhouse gas and no-one knows what the health effects of polluted air has especially on children.

Statements by the mining companies about coal seam gas being 'safe' and less polluting than coal as an energy source in order to justify their actions are specious and no more than red herrings which use empty reassurances and ill-informed references to climate change as justifications for extracting this highly questionable energy resource.

Once mining companies have been granted a license to explore they can in effect do whatever they want on the land with the minimum of environmental safeguards. The potential pollution of water with toxic chemicals used in the 'fracking' process, the damage to land and the presence of unsightly coal gas infrastructure must not be allowed to occur under any circumstances.

THE TWEED VALLEY

The Tweed Valley is internationally known as a clean, green environment of world heritage significance. This is crucially important for its current and future economic prosperity.

I own a small property of just five acres in the Tweed Valley adjacent to and with views of a World Heritage National Park. For seven years I have been making plans to retire to this small piece of land to build a house, create a rainforest along a spring fed creek, grow organic vegetables, adopt a healthier lifestyle and make a small but positive environmental contribution to this remarkable and beautiful valley which is one of the most bio-diverse and unique in Australia.

With just one year to go to my retirement a mining company has been granted a license to explore for coal seam gas in the Tweed Shire. This license will enable the mining company, if it chooses, to enter my property and those of my neighbours to undertake potentially destructive and polluting 'fracking'. This risks damaging the fragile and valuable underground water I rely on and could alter for ever the geology of the land.

Should the company find coal seam gas I can expect an occupation of my land while they extract it, for as long as it takes, possibly years and well beyond my lifetime. This will permanently destroy the intrinsic value and wholesome environment of the property I have worked hard to purchase. It will make it unliveable. To say that this concerns me is an understatement. I do not want a mining operation on my property and I do not think I am being unreasonable in saying that I should have some say in the matter.

The current situation seems to allow perpetrators all manner of privileges over private land with little prospect of significant consequences if they cause environmental damage. Meanwhile the property owner is given absolutely no rights and no consideration whatsoever. This situation is clearly unjust and flies in the face of everything considered acceptable in an apparently democratic society.

The government of NSW has a responsibility to its citizens not just to run an efficient economy but to also respect and care for this land not only for the current population but also for future generations. It has a duty to protect our vulnerable eco-systems and to refuse to allow anything which could damage the health of our environment especially when all that is on offer is short term financial benefit.

I and many thousands of others across Australia are extremely angry about the current situation which gives so much power to the mining companies and so little to land owners. If the NSW government continues to allow irresponsible mining practices to continue on our land it will face a backlash which makes the outcry about the reduced solar bonus subsidy look like a Sunday school picnic. I predict that the rural population across this state will fight back fiercely and will never give up. It will do everything in its power to protect and maintain our healthy land, water and environment.

I urge the NSW Legislative Council to heed the warnings of the damage done elsewhere and adopt a permanent moratorium on coal seam gas exploration and mining in New South Wales.

Martin Daley

12 September 2011