

**Submission
No 248**

INQUIRY INTO COAL SEAM GAS

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Date received: 6/09/2011

SUBMISSION ON DEVELOPMENT OF COAL SEAM GAS IN THE PILLIGA AND NAMOI VALLEY AREAS

by

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- 6 SEP 2011

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Introduction

My family have owned and operated a family farm on the eastern side of the Pilliga forest since 1882 when the family took up a selection and developed the land.

I have lived and worked on the family farm 'Braemar' and 'Dardanelles', in the Willala district, since starting my career in farming in 1978. During this time I have experienced the extremes of flooding and droughts, and times of dire emergency during fire events.

I have the following observations and submissions to make for your consideration with regard to the development of a coal seam gas (CSG) resource in this region.

Water Resources

The area in which our family farm is located is along the eastern side of the Pilliga forest within the exploration zone published by Eastern Star Gas (ESG).

This general area is not well endowed with a good supply of underground water. Our farm has 3 bores and one well.

1 x bore @ 340m deep @ 500 litres per hour

1 x Well @ 30m deep @ 2000 litres per hour

1 X bore @ 130M deep @ 450 litres per hour

1x bore @ 35m deep @ 500 litres per hour

For us, these are significant water supplies that water our livestock reliably, even during drought times. However they are a resource that we treat as finite and care is always taken to limit the extraction of water from these bores to only what is needed and no more. Given that these water supply bores/wells are yielding only modest flows of water, we feel especially vulnerable to any large scale extraction of water that will be occurring in our immediate region.

Flawed water study.

I recently attended a presentation by the **Namoi Catchment water study taskforce** and was dismayed to find that the study appeared to be under resourced, and was more of a desk audit on water resources in the area, rather than an actual consultation and stock take of what resources we actually have in the field.

Existing data that has been stored on public record should be being collaborated with water drilling contractors, windmill and bore repair contractors, and landholders, however it is not.

The water study was not able account for local springs and wetlands, or examine or measure the effect water extraction might have on these wetland and spring areas that occur along the eastern side of the Pilliga.

There has been no water quality or quantity audit of our local water supplies/bores/springs.

I feel the water study has not been given adequate time or financial resources for a thorough investigation into the water resources of this area, and to determine where the recharge areas are for our aquifers.

According the managers of the water study, most of the data available for our local area is being supplied by ESG.... A bit like a fox doing a stock take of chickens in the hen house.

Not good enough....

Fire risk

As a member of the local rural fire service for over 30 years, I am fully aware of the dangers of fire in the Pilliga forest.

This area is not close to population centres, and so it does not always feature in the media when affected by large fires, however there is a huge (if not epic) potential for extreme fire risks in the forest. Adding the possibility of more industrial activity/accidents and flammable gases and the fire risk is compounded. The proposed protected (cleared) areas around well heads and drilling areas are unlikely to offer protection from a Pilliga fire.

ESG has suggested that all of their well heads can be remotely shut off. This may be so in a non fire situation, however as member of the local RFS, we routinely experience communication blackouts due to smoke interference during fires. Heavy smoke will interfere with UHF, and mobile phones. I have reservations about the remote cut outs as almost all communication lines are affected,

The Pilliga is already a no go area in times of extreme wildfires during the day, with most local fire fighters unwilling to enter the forest during daylight hours,... fast moving crowning forest fires are commonplace, and ember attack can be severe,...as fire fighters we have seen what can happen.

Fire in the Pilliga is a huge hazard, to the flora, and fauna, and firefighters. Any increase in human activity is likely to bring with it an increase in fires, with a resultant loss of wildlife and habitat, let alone the industrial infrastructure and human life.

Wildlife

The Pilliga area is generally a dry area and water resources are few and far between . So if a CSG development starts using evaporation ponds or any external surface for water storage, it can be expected that this will become a resource for local wildlife.

This will be to THEIR DETRIMENT, if there is a possibility of contamination. Given that current development has killed trees in some areas of operation, this would suggest that the water is less friendly to the environment than claimed by ESG, and is therefore putting at risk local wildlife, including endangered species.

Wildlife audits on the wetland/spring areas have not been carried out to my knowledge.

Local disturbance with CSG industry, drilling and transport activity, and noisy compressor stations, will cause significant impact on the “peace and quiet” of the forest, causing disruption to local species such as the endangered barking owl.

Health Risks

There is a growing number of instances of adverse health outcomes starting to appear amongst some landholders in the Queensland gas fields. This is a new industry in Queensland and already there are issues emerging, so these health issues need to be researched before any further development continues.

As a landholder directly downwind (of prevailing North and Northwesterly winds) from the proposed mega gas field in the Pilliga, our family have some serious concerns as to the threat to our clean and healthy environment being contaminated by vapors given off in the CSG operations.

Agricultural impact

Although the initial gas resource to be developed is within the Pilliga forest, current exploration activity is suggesting that the gas wells are unlikely to be confined to the forest, and there is likely to be a spread of CSG operations into valuable agricultural areas.

Our area is typically mixed farming country with a mixture of livestock and cropping operations on a medium intensity scale. This means that the agricultural areas are not on a large scale as may be found on some western district operations. Most properties in this area are more intensively run and are vulnerable to interference on a scale suggested by the CSG industry proponents. These effects would place a significant burden on the day to day running of a farm, and such disruption could threaten the viability of some agricultural operations.

Threats to the water supply of these farms will most definitely threaten the viability of most livestock operations.

Land Values/Equity impact

Land values of farms in the exploration areas are going to be compromised. Who is going to buy a CSG affected farm in an area over run by CSG activity, and who is going to compensate the landholders for their loss of equity and amenity.

The experiences of landholders in Queensland would indicate that any CSG development will reduce the value of a landholders asset through no fault of their own. This virtually amounts to theft of an asset so that a larger operation can profit.

Offsets for clearing

ESG has suggested that clearing offsets may be sought locally, for the clearing activity in the forest. Areas of forest owned by local landholders (that are unlikely ever to be cleared) are being sought as offsets for CSG wells. Whilst this is a potential windfall income for farmers, it is a poor substitute for finding a genuine offset for the clearing of such large areas in the Pilliga.

Industry Regulation

It is clear not all parts of CSG exploration and production are not fully covered by adequate regulation, although the NSW government is looking to address this. CSG companies need to be covered retrospectively by all new regulations.

Compensation to landholders for financial impact needs to be addressed.

Health concerns need to be addressed.

Any damage to the local resources needs to be repaired, but how do you do this at 900m deep if something goes wrong?

There is currently a waiver of royalties on CSG wells for the first 5(?) years. Is this wise? All the disruption, and damage without any benefit to state and federal governments.

Quick...QuickHurry up... a gold rush mentality.

The development of coal and coal seam gas resources has a number of powerful financial interests lobbying for a timely approval of their proposals. However this pressure is resulting in the compromising of a measured and careful analysis of our current resources and our current sustainable use of them.

It is clear that the Namoi water study is limited by time and money, when both should not be an issue, and when there is the possibility of lasting damage being done to this resource. This study needs to be freed of these constraints, and a thorough assessment and understanding made of all regional aquifers, including the Great Artesian Basin.

It is becoming clear that the gas pipeline route has been chosen as stage one, or the first overlay, of the development of local gas reserves under productive agricultural areas in the Namoi valley. Test drilling is following the proposed pipeline route.

We must carefully consider the implications of such a development on such a grand scale, in such a valuable food producing region. There should be a thorough assessment of the the local environmental effects of putting gas pipelines through valuable and fragile agricultural land .Time should not be used to compromise such considerations. After all ...the gas has been there for thousands of years.

It is also clear that mistakes have been made in the development of CSG reserves both overseas and here in Australia. There needs to be careful consideration and review of these issues prior to the development of another area , so that the mistakes of the past are not repeated..

Please note that the author of this submission is not against CSG , but has serious misgivings about the haste at which the proposals are being developed, the thoroughness of the land and water studies, and the pressure that is being placed on local communities that have proven to have a sustainable track record, as compared to the CSG industry that has had a brief and patchy history.

The CSG and Coal industries must not be allowed to degrade the great environmental asset of the Pilliga forest and all that lies within it, or the water resources and agricultural regions that adjoin it. It must not threaten the health and financial viability of those who have the misfortune to live near the CSG area .

Please take to time to do the science in a careful and measured way, before any large scale CSG development is undertaken.