

**Submission
No 247**

INQUIRY INTO COAL SEAM GAS

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Date received: 7/09/2011



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30 August 2011

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- 7 SEP 2011

**LEGISLATIVE
COUNCIL**

Dear Sir

RE: SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO COAL SEAM GAS – LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Nimbin Neighbourhood and Information Centre (NNIC) has been operating for over 30 years and is the primary welfare services provider and community development organisation in Nimbin.

Our catchment area (the Nimbin bio-region) is an area approximately 30kms surrounding the Nimbin village. Our catchment population is around 5000 people. The Nimbin bio-region lies within the greater Northern Rivers region.

NNIC's community development focus since 2009 has been the development of a sustainable community. For the past two years we have been focussing on Energy, Food Security and Transport.

On 4th June 2011 we held a Community Sustainability Workshop and updated our Sustainability Plan. Over 100 community members participated. The issue of Coal Seam Gas was identified as a threat in relation to Food Security, Energy and the Environment and Biodiversity in particular. In no part of the Plan was Coal Seam Gas identified as an opportunity. The other Focus Areas included Local Jobs and Skills, Transport, Housing and the Built Environment, Health and Wellbeing, Arts and Culture, and Social and Political. The Community Plan has been widely circulated around the community for comment and feedback, and has overall community support and endorsement.

Principles of Sustainability

As you are no doubt aware, the Australian Government formally adopted a number of principles for Ecologically Sustainable Development in 1992.

(Australian Government, 1992 National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development)*.

The first of these is that: *decision making processes should effectively integrate both long and short-term economic, environmental, social and equity considerations* (Aust Government)*.

Our community is very concerned that short to medium profit and energy needs will be prioritised above the potential long term negative impact of CSG upon our environment and our community. This is clearly antithetical to this principle.

The second principle is that: *where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation* (Aust Government)*.

This principle, also known as the "precautionary principle" is one of the fundamental principles of sustainability - *In the face of uncertainty, environmental management decisions should err on the side of caution.* (Lisbon Principles – Costanza)* .

We are concerned that CSG has the potential to do significant harm to our bioregion - harm which will not easily be undone and the legacy of that harm could be worn by generations to come. It is unacceptable to forge ahead with this industry on the basis that the degree of harm is not yet clearly established (although we would argue that there is clear evidence of potentially severe harm), but rather there must be sufficient evidence that there will not be harm, prior to allowing any such development to go ahead.

The third principle is that: *the global dimension of environmental impacts of actions and policies should be recognised and considered* (Aust Government)*.

I submit that it is unacceptable to address energy needs or the global carbon pollution issue at the expense of water quality, arable land and the environment.

The fourth principle is: *the need to develop a strong, growing and diversified economy which can enhance the capacity for environmental protection should be recognised* (Aust Government)*.

I submit that CSG mining is a short term solution to our long term energy issues, is not a renewable or sustainable form of energy and that reliance on CSG or indeed gas in general as a solution to our energy needs will minimise investment into renewable energy and could postpone real innovations and economic development around renewable energy. Nimbin's primary industries include eco/green tourism, solar energy industry, and local food production. CSG activity poses a significant threat to all of our primary industries. Indeed, eco tourism and agriculture and two main industries in the Northern Rivers region and again, CSG are likely to significantly compromise both.

The fifth principle is that: *the need to maintain and enhance international competitiveness in an environmentally sound manner should be recognised* (Aust Government)*.

CSG poses a real threat to the agricultural industry. Given that our agricultural industry relies on a reputation of clean and green in order to be competitive

against markets which can produce more cheaply due to cheap labour etc, CSG activity poses a very real threat to our export agricultural industry if our water and land becomes contaminated and toxic.

In relation to the sixth principle relating to cost effectiveness, I have no comment.

The final principle of sustainability is Inclusiveness – *decisions and actions should provide for broad community involvement on issues which affect them* (Aust Government)*. This is a fundamental principle of sustainability: *participation of all stakeholders is vital in the formulation and successful implementation of decisions concerning environmental resources* (Costanza)*.

Our community sustainability plan has been developed by an inclusive community process and reflects the views, values, aspirations and commitment of our community in relation to sustainability issues.

I submit that CGS activity appears to contravene all three of the core objectives of the Government's policy relating to sustainable development, namely that:

- to enhance individual and community well-being and welfare by following a path of economic development that safeguards the welfare of future generations
- to provide for equity within and between generations
- to protect biological diversity and maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems. (Aust Government)*.

1. The environmental and health impact of CSG activities

The Nimbin bio-region is a high rainfall and flood prone area, with a relatively high water table, particularly during the wet season. One of Nimbin's identified strengths is access to a clean and viable water supply. We are relying on this capacity to continue to develop viable sustainable food production in our region.

Water gathered from the Nimbin valley catchment flows onto to the Richmond and Wilsons River systems. We are located close to the headwaters of stream flows stemming from the Nightcap ranges.

It is impossible to isolate stream flow systems throughout our region, and any contamination of water in our region is likely to have very wide and significant impact both on ground water, surface water and creek/river systems.

There is growing evidence that CGS mining, particularly where hydraulic fracturing is involved, poses a significant risk to ground and water table water quality.

Even the act of drilling holes through the water table alone, poses significant risks, as we have learned from the use of bores resulting in the raising of

water tables and salination of previously arable land throughout Australia. Adding chemicals as well as releasing methane, obviously increases the hazards.

Methane itself is a greenhouse gas and the potential escape of significant quantities will only add to the overall problem. Additionally some reports which are beginning to emerge from e.g. Cornell University and the United States Environment Protection Authority, cast doubt as to any emissions advantages of gas over coal (e.g. Cornell).*

We submit that the uncertainty as to whether the safety of our environment and water is under *threat of serious or irreversible environmental damage* from CSG mining is substantial, and in the face of such uncertainty we urge you to err on the side of caution.

Water is a fundamental of all life, we need it more than we need energy, or profit, and we must not take any risks which may contaminate the precious clean water we have left.

2. The economic and social implications of CSG activities

For the past 12 months NNIC has been funded by Food Links to develop the food security of our bioregion. We have been able to achieve an increase in local and sustainable food production and intend to continue with this work. We are very concerned about the possible impact of CSG upon our efforts to foster a sustainable agricultural industry in the region.

Further, it is clear that CSG exploration and mining has no social licence in our region and opposition is strong. Many property owners in our area are highly committed to the ecology and biodiversity and have spent as many as 30 years working to improve forestation levels, soil quality, and wildlife habitat. That this commitment could be overridden by CSG exploration and mining is a serious affront to the efforts of our community to preserve and protect our natural environment.

We have been able to attract significant community and government investment into our sustainability initiatives since 2009. The Nimbin bioregion has the highest uptake of both stand-alone and grid-feed solar systems in New South Wales. We also have recently established a mobile Community Grain Mill to address grain production and storage issues.

We have also established the local Farmers Market, strong links with our local Agricultural and Industry Society (this year we are showcasing the Inaugural Most Sustainable Produce in Show exhibit), links between local producers and have developed our post harvest processing capacity via the grain mill, tools and information and training re food safety and food production, and increased local food products on our local supermarket shelves.

We also operate the Nimbin Community Solar Farm – a small 45kW solar project running as a small social enterprise project.

Our community has identified numerous strategies to attract investment and create jobs in our bio-region and we are concerned that CSG will detract from

investment into those industries and enterprises which our community aspires to based on our strengths and progress to date. Clearly any potential risk to our water supply and arable land will detract from investment and expansion of our food production industry which has a strong organic and biodynamic focus.

We are also concerned about the so called "Dutch Disease" where resources are increasingly drawn into the mining sector and away from other sectors such as manufacturing and production. We see no long term future for our region in CSG, whereas we do see our future in renewable energy projects and sustainable industries.

3. The role of CSG in meeting our future energy needs

The Nimbin community has a Sustainable Energy Plan in place since 2009. The overall Vision of our Energy Plan is stated as:

A community which is self-reliant in our energy needs with a minimal ecological footprint and a model for other communities.

Surveys and data taken from our community indicate that we have an average household energy use of less than 5kW per household per day. We are strongly committed to low energy consumption and to meeting our own energy needs. The high uptake of solar power, the Solar Farm and our current Energy Plan which now seeks to bring pyrolytics and biomass into our energy generation mix, all demonstrate that the Nimbin community has strategies to manage the issue of our energy needs into the future.

(For a complete Evaluation of our Solar Farm project please see our website www.nnic.org.au)

Our community does not view gas as a sustainable energy source. Even if it is found that CSG mining is not a risk to the environment and our food production land, we are committed to developing sustainable energy solutions and we have invested significantly into this to date.

Given this commitment, and the fact that we as a community are low energy consumers, we would strongly oppose CSG mining occurring in our bio-region.

We believe that stronger focus and more investment should be made into smaller localised energy generators as well as into issues such as a "smart grid" rather than into an energy source which is just another a fossil fuel and retains a significant carbon footprint.

We are concerned that relying on CSG will serve only to reinforce a "Business As Usual" approach into carbon producing energy sources, will reduce investment into truly sustainable energy and ultimately will be a short term and unsatisfactory solution to a long term issue.

In relation to transport, the issue of Sustainable Transport is part of our community plan and gas has not been identified as a sustainable fuel.

In summary, there is no social licence for CSG activities to occur within our bioregion and our view is that CSG seriously threatens to undermine our work to date and our commitment to a clean energy future.

Please do not hesitate to telephone me with any queries.

Yours faithfully

Natalie Meyer
Team Leader
NNIC

***References**

Australian Government, 1992 National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development
<http://www.environment.gov.au/about/esd/publications/strategy/intro.html#WIESD>

Costanza, R. et al. (1998) Principles for sustainable governance of the oceans. *Science* 281(5374):198-199 – The Lisbon Principles)

Atkinson, David R, (2010) *Preliminary Assessment of the Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Natural Gas obtained by Hydraulic Fracturing*, Cornell University