

**Submission  
No 352**

## **INQUIRY INTO COAL SEAM GAS**

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## **Submission to the Upper House Inquiry into Coal Seam Gas**

This submission, from the Carmelite Nuns at Varroville, NSW, focuses on the *economic and social implications* of AGL's proposal to extend the Camden Gas Project northwards into the Scenic Hills area of Campbelltown, NSW.

### **Background and setting**

The Scenic Hills area, which extends from Mount Annan in the south to Denham Court in the north, forms part of the south-western extremity of the Sydney Metropolitan Area, and includes 26 suburbs in Campbelltown and adjoining parts of Camden. AGL's proposal to extend CSG extraction into this area would bring its CSG activities into Sydney's suburbs for the first time.

The Scenic Hills has been zoned Environmental Protection (scenic) since 1974. *Extractive industries* and *mines* are prohibited under the zoning. The Scenic Hills provide a scenic backdrop to Campbelltown, which was recognised by forward-thinking local government councillors when they established the protected zoning. The area forms an essential green-space buffer between Liverpool and Campbelltown, providing for the physical, psychological and spiritual health of the residents of south-western Sydney.

In contravention of the zoning, AGL Energy Ltd (AGL) has applied to the NSW Minister for Planning to put up to 72 coal seam gas (CSG) wells across Campbelltown's Scenic Hills from Mount Annan to Denham Court. AGL's strategic expansion of the first stage of the Camden Gas Project over the past 10 years suggests that these 72 wells merely represent an initial estimate.

Many more wells and associated infrastructure are expected to follow with subsequent modifications to the project, as happened in Stage 1.

### **Heritage aspects**

The Scenic Hills has significant aboriginal heritage, having been a central gathering place for the Yandel'ora peoples between Melbourne and Maroochydore. It has a rich colonial heritage, with significant links to Governor Macquarie and the explorer Charles Sturt. Varro Ville was the home of Dr Robert Townson, who established one of the early experimental farms in the colony, where he hosted Governor and Lady Macquarie in 1810. The Upper Canal, an important component of the Sydney Water Catchment area, runs through the Scenic Hills and is also listed on the State Heritage Register. Clearly, much of the landscape of the Hills has heritage value. AGL proposes to run its main gas gathering pipeline along the length of the Upper Canal in the Scenic Hills.

In addition, Mount Annan Botanic Garden is located at the southern end of the Scenic Hills. It is the Australian native plant garden of the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney, with a collection of over 4000 species, and is the largest botanic garden in Australia. It is home to 160 species of birds and other wildlife. It hosts the NSW Seedbank and the only publicly accessible collection of clonal replicas (first generation) of the endangered Wollemi Pine. It is a major cultural and natural asset of the Scenic Hills. AGL plans to locate portions of its gas gathering system in the Botanic Garden.

The sheer audacity of this proposal epitomises the problem residents have with AGL's plans for the Scenic Hills. The entire Scenic Hills, including Mount Annan Botanic Garden is an irreplaceable natural and cultural asset, yet AGL proposes to industrialise the area, seemingly without any concern for the permanent loss of its beauty, historical and cultural value.

### **Our concerns**

We, the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, are residents of the Scenic Hills, as are several other religious communities, among them the Discalced Carmelite friars, the Franciscan friars and Poor Clare nuns, the Marist Brothers, and a Serbian Orthodox community with a school under construction. We, along with small rural-residential holdings, recreational establishments and farms, established ourselves here believing that our semi-rural tranquillity was protected.

In particular, the Discalced Carmelite friars established their national Retreat Centre at Varroville over 40 years ago. Visitors come from Sydney, throughout NSW, interstate and overseas to attend retreats and receive spiritual guidance, and to use its facilities for meetings. The scenic beauty and tranquillity of the area are essential to the Centre's ability to attract retreatants. Its supportive environment for prayer would be lost with the noise of construction and operation of gas wells nearby and heavy vehicle traffic on local roads. The Retreat Centre could not continue to function and would inevitably cease to operate. It is the head house and primary ministry of the Discalced Carmelite friars in Australia.

The Carmelite Nuns live a life dedicated to contemplative prayer. We chose to live in the Scenic Hills over 20 years ago because its scenic beauty and tranquillity support our way of life, and are protected by the zoning. Countless visitors remark upon the spiritual solace they find when they come to participate in our daily religious services at our monastery in Varroville. AGL plans to locate up to six (6) gas wells on the Serbian Orthodox property next door to us.

Religious communities are not the only groups representing sensitive land use in the Scenic Hills. There are also several schools and passive recreation areas. All of these would be seriously adversely affected by the construction and operation of gas wells and associated infrastructure.

### **Long-term consequences of AGL's proposal**

The Scenic Hills itself is a finite non-renewable energy resource, providing for the spiritual well-being of residents and visitors to the area. If the NSW Minister for Planning approves AGL's proposal for CSG mining in the Scenic Hills, much of its beauty and tranquillity will be lost forever. AGL acknowledges that the construction phase for each group of 6 wells involves 6 months of continuous noise, 24 hours a day 7 days a week. The Scenic Hills will become irreversibly industrialised, with gas rigs, wells, supporting infrastructure in the form of roads, pipelines, water storage tanks, noise barriers, heavy vehicle traffic, maintenance operations, etc.

No amount of post-project remediation will be able to restore what is lost over the 20+ years' lifetime of AGL's proposed project. Over 30 threatened species of native flora and fauna, and four endangered native plant ecological communities have been identified in the area covered by the Environmental Assessment for AGL's project. At least 77 species of native birds have been identified by Kearns ornithologist Michael Paul, and their habitats including remnants of critically endangered Cumberland Plain woodland, along with threatened and endangered species of flora and fauna are likely to be driven away, never to return.

### **Recommendation for action**

We are aware that there are many unknowns in relation to the CSG industry, among them the impact of coal seam gas extraction on surface and groundwater, air quality and human health. Specialist bodies such as the National Water Commission, the National Toxics Network and Doctors for the Environment have expressed concerns about the CSG industry and called for caution. Their concerns arise from the rapid and essentially unregulated expansion of the industry in the face of insufficient knowledge about its short and long-term impacts. Recent publicity about

AGL's carelessness causing an accident at a CSG well near Campbelltown drew attention to AGL's inability to self-regulate.

We join with the specialist bodies named above and with concerned local residents in supporting the precautionary principle. Therefore, we request a moratorium on the issuing of exploration licences and the approval of all pending applications for new projects and expansion of existing projects until independent peer-reviewed research has been conducted into the impacts of the CSG industry, and the results made available to the public.

As a religious community, we recognise that economic development is necessary and we welcome research and development into renewable energy sources. We also believe unashamedly that there are important and enduring assets that money cannot buy, which short-sighted economic developments can irrevocably destroy in their haste to make money for the few.

For all the reasons stated, we request that the Scenic Hills continue to be protected, that it be preserved from coal seam gas extraction, and that AGL's application to expand the Camden Gas Project be rejected for the benefit of the present residents of south-western Sydney and for generations to come.

Sister Jocelyn Kramer OCD

On behalf of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, Varroville NSW