Submission
No 340

INQUIRY INTO COAL SEAM GAS

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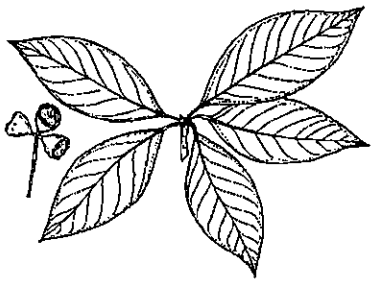

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Submission to
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5
Inquiry into Coal Seam Gas

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The North East Forest Alliance has worked for 22 years to protect the forests and environment of northern NSW.

We are deeply concerned about the effects of the coal seam gas industry on the forests, waterways, biodiversity and communities of this region.

Recommendations:

◆ That no further drilling, exploration or approvals for CSG operations be granted until a full hydrogeological study is done, mapping the underground aquifers, streams, springs and connectivity between them.

◆ No further CSG drilling, exploration or approvals until an independent assessment of the cumulative environmental, social and economic impacts has been completed and put out for public comment.

◆ That legislative changes be made that make the CSG industry accountable to legislation such as the Native Vegetation Act and the Water Management Act.

◆ The CSG industry should not be allowed to release underground water on the surface without first making an analysis of the water publicly available to ensure the water is not contaminated by heavy metals and/or salts.

◆ The CSG industry should not be allowed to pump contaminated water into underground aquifers or spaces as a method of dealing with their waste.

◆ The CSG industry should pay royalties for fugitive emissions and leaks.

◆ That communities and landholders should have the right to reject CSG exploration and/or mining in their region or on their land. That the relevant legislation be amended accordingly.

◆ CSG exploration and/or mining should not be permitted on lands which have high conservation value for their biodiversity, water or other environmental values.

◆ CSG exploration or mining should not be permitted on productive farmland, public land or near residential areas. This includes Travelling Stock Routes/Reserves.

◆ The CSG industry must be publicly and legally accountable. Third parties must have standing to take legal action against companies where laws are breached.

◆ The CSG industry must specify all chemicals used in their exploration and other operations including: quantities, and location points.

◆ No chemical shall be used without specific approval from the chemical regulator being obtained for that chemical, for that use.

◆ Prior to any operations the CSG company must make publicly available a water analysis of all known water sources in the vicinity. Any contamination of a water source must result in the immediate suspension of all operations and no further exploration or mining work to be undertaken until the contamination has been remediated to the satisfaction of the landholders, local government etc.

Submission

The CSG industry is relatively new in Australia and many of us are on a very steep learning curve to understand it's impacts.

Despite assurances from the industry that it engages in best practice, there have already been numerous examples of gas leaks and water contamination mainly in Queensland but some also in NSW.

Because Australia is a dry continent, any contamination of water sources, particularly underground water sources that are little understood, is extremely serious. There should be zero tolerance for such contamination, as it potentially takes such water sources out of production in perpetuity.

The impact of CSG mining activity on water must be seen as a major threat to rural productivity. There is little information on the interconnectivity of underground waters. Claims that CSG is only drilling in areas of deep water well below aquifers being used for stock and domestic is not borne out by the facts. Contamination has occurred.

Groundwater systems are complex and largely unmapped. The fracking process can change the pathways the water follows and create connectivity where none existed previously. Fracking is un uncontrolled process that can lead to uncontrollable consequences.

The documentary Gaslands showed numerous instances where people could no longer use their underground water due to contamination. While the companies say they will make good, and in several examples had set up tanks are were trucking in water, companies don't last for ever. Several cases of serious contamination could see a company go bankrupt and then there is no entity to pay to make good. Many of these water sources have been providing water for many decades, perhaps more than a century or two. Will the company make good for damages into the future at that timescale? No. The companies will make do in a minimal way until they have taken all the resource readily accessible and then they will leave, change their name, be bought out, etc. There is no assurance for people and communities that their water supplies will be maintained in the long-term.

Remediation of contamination is non-existent where the damage has occurred to the environment or on public land.

Other issues with water are the significant volumes being used. In Qld one proposal is for 300,000Ml/yr and that is an average. In the early years it is expected to be significantly more than that. In some cases this water is coming from the Great Artesian Basin or other aquifers that currently feed rivers and springs or supply stock and domestic via bores.

Mining companies do not pay for the water they use, nor are they subject to the same restrictions as farmers. This is not a level playing field. The richest industry in the country should be playing by the same rules as everyone else. If they had to pay for the water they use or were required to buy it on the water market given the cap on extractions in the Murray Darling Basin, then the economics of their activity would be one-step closer to being realistic.

The CSG industry because of the numerous drill points it requires has the added danger of causing significant cumulative impacts on water sources including the Great Artestian Basin.

The release of waste water from CSG wells can contaminate wetlands and other sensitive areas. There have already been examples of this occurring in NSW in the Pilliga.

Much of the waste water is highly saline and in some cases it is also contaminated with heavy metals that are brought to the surface as dissolved salts. Discharging this water across the landscape or into other water courses

could see poisoning of people, plants and animals. In fact saline water discharge in the Pilliga has already lead to native animal deaths at drill ponds and extensive tree death.

CSG mining, because it is not confined to one place or mine site has a huge footprint on the landscape. Where it occurs in natural areas, such as forests, woodlands, wetlands it can cause extensive and potentially irreparable damage.

Large areas are cleared for roads, pipelines, exploration points, dams, drill sites etc. Much of the vegetation being cleared would be protected under the NSW Native Vegetation Act if it was applied. Similarly threatened species habitat is being cleared with impunity. Again we have a double standard. The mining industry should have to abide by the same rules as other industries, rather than be given special treatment.

Additionally, the impacts of CSG due to the network of roads in places like the Pilliga is likely to lead to increases in weeds and feral animals, both of which use roads. Fire risk will also increase as the potential of gas leaks as ignition sources is very real.

It is outrageous that this high impact industrial activity can occur in State Conservation Areas or in World Heritage Areas or adjacent to National Parks, particularly as it causes irreparable damage to locations that have been recognised for their high conservation values.

Travelling Stock Routes/Reserves have been singled out as a soft-target by the CSG industry. They should be off-limits to mining. TSRs are not only important still for stock during times of drought but have significant conservation value and in some landscapes contain the oldest trees which are vital habitat for threatened species such as the barking owl or the swift parrot. Many TSRs are adjacent to waterways which increased the risk of contamination if CSG mining is allowed to proceed. TSRs often have significant cultural heritage value for both aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.

The CSG industry also proposes to takeover extensive areas of productive farmland. Land that has provided food for generations may now become unproductive. Again those impacts could be permanent depending on the extent of contamination.

An additional effect of this is the sense of despair and frustration felt by landholders who are seeing their farm, sometimes several generations of effort, being systematically degraded or destroyed. This is the case in

Queensland where early proponents of the CSG industry have now become adversaries as they have experienced the impacts first-hand.

The happy farmer on the Santos TV ad, is only happy because no drilling work has actually begun on his property. Let's see how happy he is a few years down the track.

Others in Queensland are far from happy. They have been confined to their homes due to toxic gas leaks; their residential areas have become industrial wastelands; 'only a few wells' has turned into major infrastructure with new roads bulldozed across properties on a scale never envisaged by some of those who early on signed agreements. For many there is no escape now, as property values have fallen. Who want to live in the middle of a mining operation?

It is clear that the regulatory process is grossly inadequate. Proposals are being approved when little detail has been provided, there is almost no information on issues such as hydrology and the cumulative impacts are not being considered at all. The Federal Government has been asleep at the wheel, projects that impact nationally endangered species have been operating without approval.

Apart from the reasons listed above, CSG is a fossil fuel and as such a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. Recent reports suggest that when fugitive emissions are considered CSG is comparable with coal in terms of emissions, and in no way can be considered a transitional fuel.

State Government's are hungry for mining royalties. Special treatment for the mining industry has meant that almost all proposals are approved and local governments and communities are effectively shut out of the planning process and have the negative impacts foisted upon them. Local infrastructure such as roads are degraded, and insufficient of the royalty money makes its way back to the areas where the damage is occurring.

As a society we need to make choices. Governments consistently favour short-term thinking. Mining royalties that will last a decade or two are favoured over long-term agricultural productivity and food security. In recent years there have been riots in various parts of the world due to food shortages. Much of the Murray Darling Basin in now threatened by the CSG industry. CSG mining mistakes could see huge areas taken out of production.

We continue to live beyond our means, extracting all the available resources as quickly as possible with no thought to future generations. In the case of CSG, most of it is to be exported, with contracts for Queensland gas selling to the Chinese for as little as 4c/litre.

CSG is not part of the renewable energy future we need to construct now if we are to have any hope of averting catastrophic climate change. Catastrophic is where the conditions for human life are no longer to be found on this planet. It also means that most of the other species of mammal are under threat.

While in Australia and the USA, big industry, particularly big coal, funds the sowers of doubt, in the rest of the world there is no argument. Across Africa, the Pacific and South America communities are reeling from extreme weather events and rising sea levels. Similarly in the Arctic and across much of Europe there is no 'debate' about whether it is happening, only about what should be done.

The subsidisation of the CSG industry with the special treatment that has been discussed in this submission, is delaying the transition to renewable energy alternatives.

NSW has an opportunity to stop the damage being done here that is being done in Queensland. The NSW Parliament has the opportunity to heed the growing chorus of concern. It ignores it at its peril. The ongoing civil disobedience that will result, as communities defend their livelihoods will be both expensive and politically damaging. It will be a much bigger campaign than the battle to protect our oldgrowth forests, because it unites conservationist with farmer with regional communities.

We hope the committee takes the time to listen to regional communities who need some genuine political support.