

Submission  
No 379

## INQUIRY INTO COAL SEAM GAS

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## Order of Discalced Carmelites

Mount Carmel Retreat Centre

The Director  
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
Sydney NSW 2000

7 September 2011

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

I write on behalf of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, a religious community within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Wollongong. We have lived at the above address since 24 May 1964. Since 1967 we have operated a retreat centre on this site. Also on this site are situated a monastery of Discalced Carmelite nuns, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Parish Church, and Mount Carmel High School. The Carmelites came to Varroville because it was a peaceful rural setting close to Sydney. This environment was protected in 1974 when we were zoned as part of the Scenic Hills area. This zoning has meant that we cannot sell any of our 315 acres of land. However we happily hold this land in trust for the people of Campbelltown today and in the future. Our presence here is threatened however by a proposal by AGL Energy Ltd to extend coal seam gas extraction into our area as part of its Camden Gas Project Stage 3a (Northern Expansion). Our community is opposed to this expansion. This submission will focus on issues that are

relevant to that proposed expansion.

### Coal Seam Gas Extraction in the Scenic Hills

Since 1973 Campbelltown, along with Camden and Appin was part of the Macarthur Growth Centre in South-West Sydney. The NSW State Planning Authority had earlier bought land and began the project. In association with the Federal Government the Macarthur Development Board was set up to control the new growth. This brought about the rapid urbanisation of the area and a great increase in population. As an integral part of the planning for the growth centre the areas to the east along the Georges River were designated environmentally and scenically protected. The hill area to the west of Campbelltown was zoned also as an Environmental Protection Area. These hills are now known as the Scenic Hills. They are a deeply valued backdrop to the City of Campbelltown.

The idea behind these green spaces was to give a sense of place to Campbelltown and to protect the air quality of the area. The area forms an essential green-space buffer between the sprawling suburbs of South-West Sydney and Campbelltown, providing for the physical, psychological and spiritual health of the residents of south-western Sydney.

To protect the value of the Scenic Hills extractive industries and mines are prohibited under the zoning. Ignoring this 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.

### Coal Seam Gas and our Carmelite Presence in Varroville

We, the Discalced Carmelite friars, established our Retreat Centre at Varroville in 1967. 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 and healing 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 primary ministry of the Discalced Carmelite friars in Australia.

The Carmelite Nuns live a life dedicated to contemplative prayer on our property. They chose to live in the Scenic Hills over 20 years ago because its scenic beauty and tranquillity support their way of life and that the values were 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 close to the nuns.

We have cared for our land since 1964. We have welcomed many people at no cost to those in need. For many people this has been a place of grace and healing. We have made many, often not publicised contributions to individuals as well as the wider community. We are now in the process of building a monastery here which will enable and symbolise the spiritual values of our life together. This is sensitive and sacred land and our care for it is informed by environmental and spiritual values.

Coal seam gas extraction threatens the viability of our life and service in Varroville.

#### **Coal Seam Gas Extraction Proposed in the Sydney Metropolitan Area**

The proposed extension is within the Sydney Metropolitan Area. We contend that coal seam gas extraction within the Sydney Metropolitan Area, given the scientific and health concerns expressed by reputable bodies, has significant ecological, cultural, spiritual and health risks. It would also industrialise and undermine an environmentally protected and nearby residential areas.

The proposed Northern Expansion of the Camden Coal Gas Project includes wells that are under residential areas, or areas that are soon to be developed for

housing (Gregory Hills and Catherine Fields among others). Future home owners have not been warned of the threat of coal seam gas extraction under their properties. The project features horizontal wells that will run for 2.5 km underground from the well heads, drawing gas from seams in a *subsurface area* encompassing about 26 suburbs: Blair Athol, Blairmount, Bow Bowing, Bradbury, Camden, Campbelltown, Catherine Field, Claymore, Currans Hill, Denham Court, Eagle Vale, Elderslie, Eschol Park, Glen Alpine, Harrington Park, Ingleburn, Kearns, Kirkham, Macquarie Links, Mount Annan, Narellan Vale, Raby, Rosemeadow, St Andrews, Varroville, Woodbine.

#### Expert Warnings on Coal Seam Gas extraction in Australia

Since December 2010 a number of expert warnings that have been issued. AGL has not responded to concerns in any satisfactory manner. Rather their response is that of salesmen who dismiss objections by trivialising them rather than dealing with them in a proper scientific manner.

In December 2010, the National Water Commission issued a statement warning that the “potential impacts of CSG developments, particularly the cumulative effects of multiple projects are not well understood”, noting problems associated with ‘fracking’, waste water management, water extraction and land subsidence, and “significant social impacts” caused by the disruptive nature of infrastructure construction and access. Similar concerns have been raised overseas.

In April 2011, the National Toxics Network (NTN) called for a moratorium on drilling and 'fracking' chemicals until all chemicals have been fully assessed by the industrial chemicals regulator. Doctors for the Environment, Australia (DEA) has called for a Health Impact Assessment study to investigate the potential ill health caused by all facets of the industry's operations.

Studies are underway to re-investigate the life-time impact of natural gas production on greenhouse gas emissions, raising the spectre that it may not have the advantage over coal. (David Shearman, DEA, ABC Online, April 11, 2011).

In discussions with AGL officers whenever we have brought up these concerns the response have been identical. AGL officers assure us that there are certainly just concerns about what has happened in the coal seam gas extraction industry in Queensland. It is precisely these concerns we are assured that justify the warning given by the National Water Commission. However, AGL claims that as the geology of Sydney is different these warnings do not apply.

We consider this argument to be a clear avoidance of the scientific concerns as the National Water Commission's statement is not confined to Queensland. AGL's sole argument is simply "trust us". They seek to reassure us by stressing that they are a "blue chip" company with a long history. We are not reassured by this assertion and wonder what it actually means for anyone who is not a shareholder.

Indeed, AGL has not conducted scientifically valid ground water monitoring in previous stages of the CGP, potentially in breach of its existing Petroleum Production Leases. The State Government is carelessly putting the public at risk in allowing this, and in continuing to approve successive modifications and stages of the CGP without knowing what damage may have been done in the past by AGL's existing processes and approach.

That there is no truly independent monitoring of CSG mining in NSW to ensure that "conditions of approval" and safety standards are being fully met, makes a mockery of the approval process. The Environmental Assessment for the Northern Expansion of the Camden Coal Gas Project assumes that there are no 'below ground' risks. Yet this is precisely the area of greatest concern to the National Water Commission. AGL expects to carry out critical site-specific studies only after the approval of its project. This avoids public scrutiny of documents that should be part of the project decision. Key elements of the project have not yet been specified. The approval process has simply not been transparent. Whenever an objection is made AGL make a modification which it claims resolves the issue. It is far from clear that this is because it is simply an unverified assertion by AGL.

That there has been no truly independent monitoring of coal seam gas extraction in NSW to ensure that the conditions of approval and safety standards are being



fully met is truly a disgrace. Self regulation has meant that inevitable spills and mishaps have been and will continue to be covered up. How can coal seam gas extractors involved in a commercial industrial operation be impartial judges of the human and environmental consequences of their actions?

The evangelical fervour of AGL for this project at a public meeting in St Andrews appeared to have more to do with the retention of their jobs, salaries and bonuses than the common good. We have had the sense that we are in the presence of salesmen who are very keen to sell their product. We have found that they can be very economical with the truth in responding to our concerns. They use technical wording to cover up real concerns, for example in regard to the use of certain chemicals. It has been asserted to us that certain chemicals are not used. But then we were alerted that by a member of the Legislative Assembly of NSW that in fact these same chemical are used but are called additives.

AGL has emphasised its good relations with the local community. In our experience and that of others we have spoken to including local members of the Legislative Assembly of NSW (from both sides of the house) and Campbelltown City Council aldermen this is simply not true. We have been listened to, certainly, but, frustratingly, not heard. Our concerns are dismissed. We are urged to 'buy' the product by insistent 'salesmen'. This is not a relationship, let alone a good relationship. There is no mutuality or respect. The only concern

for AGL is the approval of the project and it would appear the profit that will result.

For us Carmelites, a small and poor religious community our present situation is that our needs and hopes have not been heard. It feels like we are collateral damage. Our very viability and the viability of this heritage landscape is threatened by a 'blue chip' company determined to exploit the resources under our land. We do not have the resources to mount an advertising campaign as AGL has done in recent days. Our appeal to this committee of the Legislative Council is for justice. There are many things more important than money- among them there is a sacred land where people come for healing and refreshment, a connection with nature, our Aboriginal heritage and the colonial history of our state.

#### **Coal Seam Gas Extraction threatens Critical Infrastructure**

Sydney's 1888 Upper Canal which brings water from Avon and Nepean dams to Prospect Reservoir is at risk due to AGL's proposal to put wells and its main spine gas gathering line adjacent to the canal. This canal carries at least 20% of Sydney's water supply. The danger to an essential service through accidents or spills is clear. Even more chilling is the front page article of the Sydney Morning Herald of 24 September 2010 headed "Mine threatens City Water" reported that leaked confidential documents from Apex Energy NL "detail plans to extract coal seam gas from old coalmines along the edge of Lake Burragorang,

the reservoir at Warragamba Dam." I refer the committee to the submissions made to the Department of Planning by the Sydney Catchment Authority, the NSW Office of Water and Campbelltown City Council in regard to the proposed Northern Expansion of the Camden Gas Project. These are on the webpage of the NSW Department of Planning.

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

The Scenic Hills itself is a fragile 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 extraction 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 be 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.

Rich layers of heritage in the Hills are threatened these include- "critically endangered" remnant Cumberland Plain Woodland, Aboriginal 'places' and artefacts, as well as colonial landscapes and historic estates that shaped the beginnings of the pastoral industry in NSW.

#### Recommendation for action

1. 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 coal seam gas industry, and the results made available to the public.
2. We request that all coal seam gas extractive industries be banned from the Sydney Metropolitan Area.
3. We request that all coal seam gas extractive industries be banned from environmental protection areas.
4. We specifically request that since the proposed Northern Expansion of the

Camden Gas Field Stage 3a not be approved as it is within the Sydney Metropolitan Area, and that it is an extractive industry which undermines the Scenic Hills Environmental Protection Area and our own viability.

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spokesman on public issues for the Discalced Carmelite Friars,

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