

21 May 2015



To: House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment

**Submission to the inquiry on the administration and transparency of the Register of Environmental Organisations (the Register) and its effectiveness in supporting communities to take practical action to improve the environment.**

From: Basin Sustainability Alliance Inc.

The Basin Sustainability Alliance (BSA) is a not-for-profit group established to provide advocacy and support to landholders and rural communities who are concerned about the rapid expansion of the coal seam gas industry and the associated environmental, social and health impacts.

Nine of the eleven BSA committee members are rural landholders engaged in agriculture and/or livestock production as their main source of income and of these committee members one is a bore driller and another a vet and the third an accountant. Of the other two committee members who are not directly involved in agriculture, one is a Solicitor and the other a retired vet.

We would like to thank the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment for the opportunity to provide this submission to assist in your inquiry on *the administration and transparency of the Register of Environmental Organisations (the Register) and its effectiveness in supporting communities to take practical action to improve the environment.*

We are a prime example of a group that does not fit the strict definition to allow us to be listed as a Tax Deductible Gift Recipient on the Environmental Register, and yet our charter is very heavily focussed on ensuring a sustainable future for our water, land and communities.

Our charter is as follows:

1. **To provide a conduit between stakeholders** (including individual landholders, landholder groups, businesses, communities, interested citizens, towns, local authorities, mining, petroleum and gas companies, regulators, administrators and government) to discuss, share and disseminate information about mining and petroleum activities (such expression including but not limited to the extraction of coal seam gas, underground coal gasification, coal to liquid and any like activities with the potential to adversely impact on farmers, graziers, towns or other rural interests) throughout the Great Artesian Basin from a Queensland perspective.
2. **To encourage and promote the fair and proper legislative and administrative processes** to enforce the orderly and sustainable planning, development and regulation of mining, oil, gas and other extractive industries with the potential to impact on the Great Artesian Basin and the farming and rural sector generally in both Queensland and Australia.

3. **To work towards the sustainable management of rural land and water resources** for future generations throughout the Great Artesian Basin from a national perspective.
4. **To protect and/or enhance the entitlement to existing quantities and qualities of water** of rural interests (including landowners, towns and communities) under existing state legislation, incidental to mining and petroleum activity impacts throughout the Great Artesian Basin.
5. **To protect the Murray Darling Basin** and rural lands and interests generally throughout the Great Artesian Basin from the adverse impact of salt, mineral and other contamination or other adverse impacts as a result of mining and petroleum activity.
6. **To protect and enhance the natural environment** from adverse impacts from mining and petroleum activities throughout the Great Artesian Basin.
7. **To work with government bodies and representatives** and others as necessary to ensure timely, independent, transparent, legislated processes are implemented to facilitate planning monitoring and recording of the impact of mining/petroleum activity impact on rural interests throughout the Great Artesian Basin.
8. **To work with government to ensure appropriate legislation** is in place to respond to evidence or reasonable anticipation of significant impact on ground and surface water resources throughout the Great Artesian Basin.
9. **To promote corporate best practise**, social and sustainability responsibility for mining and petroleum companies operating throughout the Great Artesian Basin.
10. **To develop and promote fair and reasonable compensation** for landholders adversely impacted by mining and petroleum activities throughout the Great Artesian Basin.
11. **To inform and educate Australians of the natural resources**, importance of long-term sustainability of such resources and the likely impacts from mining and petroleum activities throughout the Great Artesian Basin.
12. **To preserve the rural lifestyle**, the existing rural social fabric and contribution of farming families to Australian society.

As a not for profit group, we have been on many occasions been invited to consult with government and industry for a landholder perspective on the CSG industry. We have been asked to review policies, provide submissions on legislation. We have been expected to voluntarily participate in research, seminars, and think-tanks. We have been expected by government to be a conduit for information to landholders. We do all this with unpaid volunteers and people are prepared to pay membership fees for which they cannot get any financial/tax incentives for doing so. Without such incentives, paying membership fees can be a struggle to pay in the current rural environment. Many of our active volunteers and members are professionals and farmers with limited spare time as they have their own full time jobs and businesses to maintain.

The fact that we do not have DGR status has lessened our ability to be as effective as we would have liked. For example we have been limited in our ability to

- grow our resources;
- travel and meet with stakeholders in government and industry;
- afford the services of scientific, groundwater experts;
- purchase testing equipment to assist landholders with collection of independent air, water, noise, gas seepage data
- conduct advertising campaigns in the media to inform the general public about the adverse impacts of the resource industry which is being forced upon rural industries;
- counter press statements made by the resource industry which contain spurious claims or do not reflect a balanced reporting of industry benefits and impacts;
- reach out to, and inform farmers of pertinent facts about CSG that they will need to draw on in their dealings with resource companies; and
- hold information sessions for landholders which are free from the bias of industry and government departments whose only interest is to facilitate the CSG industry.

We had a situation a few years ago where a corporate entity was very keen to provide us with a significant donation to support our work, but they withdrew the offer when they were unable to claim the tax deduction for the contribution.

Without DGR status, there is a significant strain on the individuals who have been willing to donate their time to help the cause.

In our case, we feel the power imbalance is quite frightening. The CSG companies are able to pay lobbyists, and conduct expensive public relations and advertising campaigns (sometimes containing false claims) to convince the public of the benefits and safety of CSG. All of these activities are tax deductible for the companies. Further, these costs are included as expenses that reduce the royalties they are required to pay to the government. We have evidence that there are problems with the industry, and yet we do not have the funds to run mass-marketed PR campaigns to communicate these concerns.

Our organisation is an example of a group that doesn't do hands-on environmental work, but without groups like ours providing the on-the-ground case studies and sharing how the industry is impacting primary production and the security of water, we could see an Australia with an extremely limited ability to produce food and fibre. Ensuring we have food to eat and water to drink should most definitely be considered an important environmental cause.

BSA's charter is about effecting positive change at the policy level. This can be just as important as 'on-ground environmental works' such as going out and physically planting trees. We do not believe that the definition of an organisation on the register should be limited by whether they carry out on the ground environmental works. We fear such a policy would only create a situation where organisations might invent unnecessary and ineffective on the ground projects simply to maintain their status.

We support transparent financial reporting of such groups.

Given our limited resources, and reliance on volunteers, we are unable to commit the time to fully review the various sections of legislation and guidelines that are being reviewed as part of this enquiry. However we wanted to take this opportunity to share our general thoughts on this matter.

We hope the Committee will recognise the value of environmental groups can be broad and that such groups should be offered the opportunity to fully seek out financial support for their activities.

We would be happy to speak to the committee members in an interview or at a hearing if required.

Yours sincerely

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Lyn Nicholson  
BSA Chairperson