

SUBMISSION - SELECT COMMITTEE ON UNCONVENTIONAL GAS MINING

The irresponsible determination by successive Queensland State Governments, in conjunction with Federal and Local levels of government, to rely on the extraction of Unconventional Gas Mining, which includes the Coal Seam Gas Industry and the Linc Energy Underground Gasification Project at Hopeland near Chinchilla as a major component of the State's resources-driven economy has been a monumental failure, economically, sociologically, environmentally, and an affront to the human rights of people living in close proximity to mining operations and infrastructure. Unfortunately, this industry has been perpetuated through a climate of corruption, lies, cover ups and bullying, and by the greedy lure for wealth which cannot justify the sacrificing of people and the environment as nothing more than collateral damage, for the misguided and mistaken view that this was somehow ensuring the State's economic future and prosperity.

The introduction above, and the comments below come through my capacity as a Uniting Church Minister with three years' experience of working in an area which includes the Western Downs and the southern end of the Banana Shire, from general observations, from limited observations of scientific data, and from conversations with residents and landholders which have led me to conclude that there has been a systematic failure by all levels of government to effectively manage this industry, its effects on the environment, and to adequately care for, and or, compensate affected people or to adequately deal with breaches of regulations and areas of non-compliance. As mentioned above, it is my belief that successive governments have failed to properly investigate claims of bullying by mining company representatives and have enacted legislation which has benefited already powerful mining companies over individuals, landholders and the communities in which they live.

Government Failure

In my opinion, responsibility for the problems and concerns outlined above rests with all levels of government. For example, revelations by Simone Marsh point to a State Government approval process that was rushed, inadequate and irresponsible, and which failed to heed the warnings of problems that were already coming from gas fields overseas. As a consequence, this short sightedness has spawned an industry that is destroying the lives of Queenslanders and putting the environment, especially underground water resources, at great risk, and which so-called tough Federal Government environmental regulations have been unable to protect.

In a further failure, I have heard several accounts of how State government regulatory bodies such as the Coal Seam Gas Compliance Unit have been largely unsuccessful in dealing with breaches of regulations and CCAs and have lost the trust of landholders. Unless complaints are made in the prescribed way, they are largely ignored, and those that do make it into the system often get lost as they bounce from government department to government department until they are effectively buried in a mass of red

tape. Several reports are now emerging, including one that appeared in the Australian Newspaper of 27th January 2016, in which some mining workers are prepared to back up claims of serious compliance failures by mining companies.

Gas Commissioners have also been labelled as ineffective and as being on the side of the mining companies. It was related to me how one Gas Commissioner boasted about the great spectacle it would be when, for a second time, the gas from approximately one hundred kilometres of the pipeline between Reedy Creek and Wandoan was released into the atmosphere so that maintenance work could be carried out on the pipeline. On each occasion, advice of this was only given to farmers living in close proximity to the pipeline, whilst farmers living further away could only wonder at what farmer described as the sound of a low-flying F111 that startled his cattle and caused them to stampe.

In a further blow to landholders and rural communities, the Newman government made changes to mining legislation which one farmer described as not being able to be more hurtful to landholders than if the mining companies had written the legislation themselves. The mining and government line that CSG and agriculture can coexist is in the opinion of many, a myth. In almost three years, I can only recall conversations with two landholders who spoke favourably of CSG activity on their properties, one of whom pointed out that he was making more money from the gas company "than that goanna country could ever produce." Unfortunately, many gas wells and the associated infrastructure is being placed on rich black soil and strategic cropping and grazing land, and farmer's businesses are being compromised.

Reports from residents, especially those living in the area of the Tara Estates, regularly indicate problems with Queensland Health in that they find some departmental representative difficult to deal with and unhelpful. These residents report being made to feel as if they are a nuisance and irrational, and even pests. I have also witnessed one occasion where, instead of offering to investigate, questions regarding a perceived health issue on the gas fields was met with more questions, until the questioner gave up in disgust.

Another major failure of the State Government, I believe, has been in its apparent reluctance to adequately investigate health issues as they began to be reported. The Health Department report, "Coal seam gas in the Tara region: Summary risk assessment of health complaints and environmental monitoring data" which is dated March 2013 concluded that "a clear link can not be drawn between health complaints by some residents in the Tara region and impacts of the local CSG industry on air, water, or soil within the community." ("6. Conclusions" p-18 of the report) The report went on to suggest "Solastalgia" as the reason for residents' complaints about health issues however, whilst their situation is stressful and has its own consequences, physical symptoms such as rashes and blisters which I have witnessed, and from what they have told me, something is making them sick.

Despite the conclusions reached in the report, findings which successive State Governments have used to support claims that the industry is safe, and to justify its expansion, I believe that the report is flawed on at least two accounts. Firstly, the groups of peoples sampled for health issues was relatively small and tests carried out, I am told by a qualified Doctor, were somewhat limited. Secondly, the air monitoring which was done was also limited. It lacked independence as it was carried out by mining company employees, and was also conducted in an area well away from the area where a number of wells have been placed in close proximity to people's homes.

Despite these short-comings, the report did recommend that further testing and monitoring should be carried out (Recommendation d). However, to my knowledge, this has not been done. This is despite assurances from former Premier Campbell Newman and former Health Minister Lawrence Springborg, in response to a letter from local Clergy (Ps. Iven Hewett, Fr. Jim Cronin and myself) that this task had been assigned to the relevant government departments. It remains a matter of concern that no comprehensive and reliable monitoring is being done in the area, especially as health related concerns by residents continue to grow. Nobody seems to be listening.

Whilst the Health Department report, along with its short-comings, but also the recommendation for further testing and monitoring has been held up by government and industry as clearing the CSG industry of any responsibility regarding resident's concerns, a comprehensive report released in April 2013 by Dr. Geralyn McCarron; "Symptomatology of a Gas Field" showing a disturbing rise in many of the category of illnesses as described by residents living in the gas field was labelled as too subjective, and largely dismissed by Health Department officials.

This is not to say that CSG companies have not responded to complaints by residents however, when they have, and when testing equipment seems to indicate an adverse finding, testing equipment has said, by the operator, to be faulty, who has then usually made a hasty retreat never to return. Then when residents have done any testing of their own (gas monitor, Geiger counter, noise monitor), their test results are dismissed because they were not qualified to operate the equipment.

Given the types and frequency of illnesses and irritations being reported by residents living in the gas field, and the dangerous substances that have been identified as being present in their tanks and dam water, one would think that governments at a State and Local level would have been proactive in trying to find the cause, but they have not. This, I believe, points to a systematic failure in caring for the residents whose basic welfare they should be responsible for. It is indeed sad when residents have to either source safe and reliable drinking and washing water, or rely on people such as myself delivering bottled water on a regular basis. Unfortunately, in this instance, the lure of money, jobs and economic growth seems to have taken precedence over the human rights and the health and well-being of people.

Economic Failure

Unfortunately, the reliance on the Coal Seam Gas industry and the resources industry and its hollow promises for Queensland's economic prosperity has been misplaced. To date, royalties from the CSG industry have been well below expectation and with the downturn in the mining industry, and as recently reported in the media, the Queensland Resources Council is now seeking a reduction in royalty payments. As well as sacrificing the health and well-being of a group of Queenslanders, governments at all levels have risked and gambled on Queensland's economic development and lost.

As well as the State and Queenslanders losing out in general, it is the people living in the gas field who have lost the most as land values have crashed and people's properties are now only worth a fraction of what they paid for them. Families who want to get away from the health risks of living in a gas field can't, because they simply cannot afford to leave. They are trapped. As one man described some of the people living in the Tara Estates, "We are round pegs who could not fit into square holes. We finally found a place where we could fit in, and now that's been taken away from us."

Falling land values have also effected towns such as Dalby, Chinchilla, Miles, Wandoan, Taroom and Roma, towns which have endured the boom and bust cycle, where for every short-term benefit, a new problem has emerged. In many of these communities, houses in their hundreds have stood empty for months, and property and business investors have been driven to the wall.

Sociological Failure

Across the length and breadth of these towns and communities there are people who bear the scars of rapid change. People who feel trapped because they cannot leave, people worn out and frustrated from trying to protect their families, and people who no longer recognise the place they once knew as their town. The boom and bust cycle, along with the feeling of being trapped in a place they no longer want to be, as well as an inability to deal with such rapid change has seen a sharp rise in mental health issues, but there is no increase in professional help because governments at all levels are still insisting that there is no problem. In the meantime, I and others do what we can to listen to the stories of frustration and suffering, acting as if to release pressure valves of pent up anger and hurt as people do us the honour of allowing us into their lives to share in their stories.

This frustration and anger also extends to farming families who have felt forced to sign agreements with mining companies for entry onto their land and the establishment of gas wells, but have little or no legal recourse when mining companies act badly. Once these agreements are signed, it is reported that CSG workers and contractors generally do as they please, often ignoring biosecurity issues such as wash down procedures to minimise the spread of weeds, they drive where they please, rather than on designated tracts, they leave gates open and generally disrupt farming businesses.

Sadly, confidentiality clauses and the dilemma of whether to fight the company or to give in has pitted rural families against each other. Instead of neighbours being a lifeline in times of trouble and a social support of friendship and loyalty, mining companies have successfully and deliberately divided and conquered through tactics which include bullying, manipulation and threats of legal action ensuring that in many instances, battlelines of conflict and mistrust are drawn and a vitally important support network for people living in rural areas has been torn down with dire consequences for a people unable to access the support services that people living in larger towns and cities often take for granted.

As an example of the trauma caused by tactics employed by mining companies, eager to push aside any opposition by landholders for access to their land, I had the privilege of traveling from Chinchilla to Dalby with the much loved and respected George Bender. As we travelled, George shared his story of ten years of bullying and manipulation, and how, more recently, work required to seal a once reliable bore that was now blowing gas, was being tied to George agreeing to grant the company access to put wells on his land. When George refused, he described how he had been left with the threat that he would never win. As George told it, he had bluntly been told by the mining company, we will have wells on your land. If you refuse, the next step is Land Court. We will win and there's not a thing you can do about it because the government is on our side.

Sadly, it was only a short time later that George took his life, and one can only wonder at how many other landholders and their families are being bullied and threatened and suffering a similar anguish.

The following quote sums up something of the frustration felt by George (and others) and the lack of understanding and willingness to admit that there is a problem by politicians and government departments who gambled on prosperity, but broke the heart of a significant group of people on the Western Downs and beyond.

"I don't think anyone is listening ... I don't think the nation is listening. I don't think any one of you politicians care, you are a turntable, you walk in, walk out, you talk the talk, you are here for show. You are not listening." (George Bender)

Although not well reported, a number of suicides also occurred in the mining camps where mine workers were surrounded by people, but were separated from their loved ones and what was happening at home. Although some couples and families were able to make Fly in and Fly out work, there are studies that show that for many others it did not. Once when I raised this as an issue at a mining camp I was visiting, I was told that there were telephone counsellors on standby able to be accessed 24/7. Sadly, this proved ineffective for some and another group of families suffered the loss of a loved one.

Now that there is the downturn in the mining industry, a new problem is emerging in towns where rents were once unrealistically high and, in some cases, hundreds of houses are now empty. Low rents have attracted a new group of people to these towns, and whilst this is some good news for struggling businesses and schools, these people bring with them a whole new set of problems, including dysfunctional families, for whom the support services are simply not there.

Environmental Failure

As well as heavily impacting people and communities, I believe that the CSG industry is having a detrimental effect on the environment which in turn impacts on people and puts at risk the rich rural land of much of the area, its food production and the underground water which is so essential for agriculture, grazing and the viability of inland towns. Some relate fears of the Great Artesian Basin being seriously contaminated, and there can be no doubt that due to the large amounts of water extracted with the gas, tomorrow's water is being used today, even if some is treated and used for irrigation purposes. Many residents in the area cannot understand why an industry that will be here for a relatively short period of time is being given such preferential treatment over food production and the long term well-being of the land and the environment.

Whilst there is some conjecture as to whether or not gas has always naturally escaped and made its way to the surface, indications are that this is increasing in conjunction with the drilling of more and more gas wells. The Condamine is bubbling with sufficient gas coming to the surface to be lit on fire. An increasing number of previously reliable bores are blowing gas, and water levels in many of those that still operate have dropped, some in excess of fifty metres. Unfortunately, make good agreements have largely proven to be ineffective as this usually involves financial compensation or, more rarely, the drilling of new bores however, this does not completely solve the problem of the disappearing water.

Mining companies have been given unfettered access to underground water and since water is a bi-product of the CSG process thousands of litres are being brought to the surface every day bringing with it a cocktail of chemicals that put at risk the health of anyone coming in contact with it. It has been reported to me that high levels of dangerous chemicals are constantly being released into the air and water sources. Whilst much of this water is now contained in evaporation ponds, I have been told that in 2008/9, it was common practice to spray this water on the roads as a dust control measure. Although this was reported to government authorities, it was never investigated.

The practices of flaring and fracking have also been shown to release dangerous chemicals however, assurances by government and industry that these practices are heavily regulated and completely safe hold little comfort for people living close by who have learned to recognise the dreaded smell and taste of something in the air that

makes them sick, and that when it rains they will often feel lethargic and cough and break out in sores and skin rashes.

Human Rights Failure

The effect of the CSG industry which I am seeing and hearing about is a failure to recognise the human rights of a group of people seemingly being sacrificed for the purpose of economic development. It is wrong to ignore sickness (physical & mental) or to see it as somehow acceptable, even if the industry did deliver the economic development promised before the first licences were ever issued and which many politicians from both the major parties still use to attempt to justify the existence and expansion of this industry whilst, at the same time, remaining blind to the failure of the government to care for its citizens in so many different ways. Human rights and the environment should not be so seriously compromised for a better set of employment figures. This is morally wrong.

Conclusion

Although, in some cases, my submission may lack the appropriate scientific data to prove much of what I have stated in the above, what I have included is the result of listening and watching over a period of almost three years. What I have included has been repeated many times over and by many different people. I have been privileged to have been taken into the trust and confidence of many individuals and families. I have been amazed at their honesty and integrity, desiring, at first, to cooperate with the CSG industry, for the good of Queensland and the wider community, just as long as they could be guaranteed that it was safe for the industry to be operating in such close proximity to their homes, and then feeling their sense of betrayal when their concerns have been largely ignored, minimised, or dismissed as lifestyle issues.

The question still remains, is it safe? Unfortunately, the answer which I have heard given on a number of occasions by government and mining representatives of, "There are risks involved with everything. Even getting out of bed in the morning holds a certain amount of risk." is not acceptable.

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