

Friends of the Pilliga

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Submission to Senate Enquiry into Impacts of Coal Seam Gas Extraction on the Murray Darling Basin

Friends of the Pilliga is a community group based around Coonabarabran, NSW. We have developed a particular interest in the proposal by Eastern Star Gas to develop a gas field of over 1000 wells in the north east Pilliga, part of the Murray Darling Basin.

We understand that the focus of concern so far has been on highly productive agricultural land but consider that impacts on high conservation value natural areas by projected coal seam gas developments are equally worrying.

Extraction of coal seam gas is a threat to the whole Murray Darling Basin. The impacts should not be considered on a case by case basis but cumulatively across regions and across the whole basin.

In order to drill to the deep coal beds, large amounts of water will be required. The Pilliga is largely devoid of surface water and thus water would need to be provided by underground aquifers. The effects of this are largely unknown but would almost inevitably have effects well beyond the immediate area.

The wells would need to be drilled through the Great Artesian Basin with the inevitable production of cross linkages. In spite of protestations on the part of the gas company this is another case of inadequate knowledge of the long-term consequences of their actions.

In addition, large amounts of water are produced to enable the gas to be extracted. While this is claimed to be largely contaminated by sodium

bicarbonate, many other substances are also present. Treatment by reverse osmosis will require large amounts of energy and probably still not produce useful water. This contaminated water is currently being disposed of into Bohena Creek which flows into the Namoi. It will also produce significant quantities of waste material which will require safe disposal.

Property Rights and Value of Landholders

While development of a CSG field in the Pilliga may seem to have little potential for impact on property rights, this is not so.

Should this proposal go ahead, pipelines will be required to carry the gas under high pressure to Newcastle for export. Their proposal indicates that it will go across the Liverpool Plains and have a high impact on those landholders whose land it will cross as well as damaging the highly erodible farming soils.

In addition, once established there will be pressure to use the infrastructure to the maximum. This will lead to further gas field development both along the pipeline to the south east and following the projected high gas potential beds under prime agricultural land to the west of Narrabri and Bellata to Moree.

A coal seam gas development in the Pilliga is the thin end of the wedge, picking off a supposedly easy target first.

Socio-economic impacts

The Eastern Star Gas proposal indicates the development of a large associated camp facility. This surely implies the use of a fly-in/fly-out workforce with specialised skills. It is well known that these people contribute little to the economies of regional towns. There will be far fewer local jobs than are promised.

General comments

The Pilliga is well known for its huge fast-moving wildfires which can spot 20km ahead of the firefront. Coal seam gas is highly flammable and extraction wells are notorious for leakages of gas. Summer lightning strikes are very common in the area. The fire consequences from the potential development are frightening.

ESG claims that they will only disturbing 3% of the forest on their lease. However with the projected roads, pipeline clearing and treatment facilities, 100% of the area will be affected by fragmentation of the bush. This has huge impacts on the fauna of the area.

Landholders in the farming lands surrounding the Pilliga consider that the presence of such an undisturbed expanse of bush influences local climate and helps generate the reasonably reliable rainfall for the area. Fragmentation of the bush would affect this.

There is a considerable difference between the controls over clearing on private land under the Native Vegetation Act and the freedom for coal seam gas developers to do almost as they please. Should this development go ahead, licence conditions should be at least as stringent as those imposed on Forests NSW for harvesting timber.

There is much talk about adaptive management of these sorts of developments. That's not possible if the impacts aren't apparent for years afterwards and especially if the impacts are irreversible.

Any decisions regarding such proposals are taken individually. They need to be considered on a regional level, with regard to cumulative impacts.

Coal seam gas promotes itself as 'clean and green'. This may be so when only combustion is taken into account. It does not include emissions associated with all the steps of the process as well as the loss of ecosystem services from the clearing of bushland. A 3% methane leakage rate cancels any greenhouse gas emissions advantage claimed for CSG over coal.

Finally it is a disappointment that the only public consultation concerning this issue are to be held in Queensland. The issue is important within a much wider area.

In conclusion, coal seam gas extraction should be banned in the Murray Darling Basin. It should be prohibited on highly productive farming country, in high conservation value bushland and anywhere associated with important aquifers.

Yours faithfully

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Friends of the Pilliga