



ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

31 August 2021

Mr Alex Underwood
Managing Director
Empire Energy Group Ltd
Level 19
20 Bond Street
Sydney NSW 2000

By email:

Dear Mr Underwood

Oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin

As you are aware the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee is currently inquiring into oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin.

As part of its inquiry, the committee received information from Empire Energy Group Ltd (Empire Energy) and the Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources (DISER). On 23 August 2021, documents were also tabled in the Senate in compliance with an Order for Production of Documents (OPD No. 1209) that are directly relevant to the inquiry.

Based on this information the committee has the following questions:

1. The response to OPD No. 1209 states that 'there has been no correspondence between the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction and Empire Energy or its subsidiaries discussing the program' (p. 1). However, Lock the Gate Alliance has made a submission to the inquiry that contains an email from an unnamed Empire Energy employee to the office of the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction dated 4 January 2021, suggesting that someone at Empire Energy might have discussed the grant program in late 2020:

Just before Christmas we discussed the Beetaloo Grant Program. Have you been able to identify the eligibility criteria and application process? Or could you please put me in touch with someone in Minister Pitt's office who may be able to assist?

Can you please advise the committee when, where and how this discussion occurred, who was present and what aspects of the grant program were discussed?

Did Minister Taylor's office provide you with contact details for Minister Pitt's office as requested?

Can you clarify whether you, your subsidiaries or any staff communicated verbally or in writing with the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction or the Minister for Resources

and Water, or either of their offices, in relation to the eligibility criteria and application process for the grant program prior to 18 March 2021?

When did you first become aware that the grant program would operate on a first-come-first-served basis?

2. DISER's FOI Disclosure Log 21-013-68011m contains an email dated 14 January 2021 entitled 'Email to Minister Taylor from Empire Energy re Beetaloo Basin regulatory reform' from Empire Energy to the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction (p. 6). Did this email in any way reference the grant program? Can you provide a copy of this document?
3. The response to OPD No. 1209 indicates that the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction has formally met with you on three occasions in the last 24 months (p. 2). Can you please advise the committee whether you, your subsidiaries or your staff have met informally with Minister Taylor and on those occasions referenced the grant program in any way?
4. *The Saturday Paper* has reported:

An invitation was extended to federal Resources Minister Keith Pitt, on behalf of the chairman of Empire Energy, Paul Espie, for a site inspection at the company's proposed gas mine site in the Beetaloo Basin in the Northern Territory. The invitation added: "I understand that meetings in Darwin with Northern Territory government ministers are being arranged by Minister Taylor's office and also a CLP [Country Liberal Party] fundraiser dinner (21 August 2021, p. 1).

Can you please confirm whether this invitation to Minister Pitt referenced a CLP fundraising dinner held at Darwin in October 2020? To your knowledge, how did the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction come to attend the Beetaloo site visit?

The committee would appreciate your response to its questions by 13 September 2021.

Yours sincerely

Senator Sarah Hanson-Young
Chair



13 September 2021

Senator Hanson-Young
Chair
Senate Environment and Communications References Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator,

Inquiry into oil and gas exploration and production in the Beetaloo Basin

Your letter of 31 August asks the following questions:

1. The response to OPD No. 1209 states that 'there has been no correspondence between the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction and Empire Energy or its subsidiaries discussing the program' (p. 1). However, Lock the Gate Alliance has made a submission to the inquiry that contains an email from an unnamed Empire Energy employee to the office of the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction dated 4 January 2021, suggesting that someone at Empire Energy might have discussed the grant program in late 2020:

Just before Christmas we discussed the Beetaloo Grant Program. Have you been able to identify the eligibility criteria and application process? Or could you please put me in touch with someone in Minister Pitt's office who may be able to assist?

Can you please advise the committee when, where and how this discussion occurred, who was present and what aspects of the grant program were discussed?

- My telephone discussion with Minister Taylor's office on or about 21 December 2020 made the same request as the follow-up email as to how and when information about the grants program, which had been publicly announced on 17 December 2020, would be available.

Did Minister Taylor's office provide you with contact details for Minister Pitt's office as requested?

- No.

Can you clarify whether you, your subsidiaries or any staff communicated verbally or in writing with the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction or the Minister for Resources and Water, or either of their offices, in relation to the eligibility criteria and application process for the grant program prior to 18 March 2021?

- There was no communication other than the email and phone call cited above.

When did you first become aware that the grant program would operate on a first-come-first-served basis?

- The application documentation made clear that applications would be processed as they were received, and applications would no longer be received once the grant monies had been fully allocated. The first use of the phrase above I recall was in the appearance of Mr Trotman before public hearings on 2 August 2021.

2. DISER's FOI Disclosure Log 21-013-68011m contains an email dated 14 January 2021 entitled 'Email to Minister Taylor from Empire Energy re Beetaloo Basin regulatory reform' from Empire Energy to the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction (p. 6). Did this email in any way reference the grant program? Can you provide a copy of this document?

- This email did not reference the grants program. Its content is not relevant to the term of reference of your inquiry.

3. The response to OPD No. 1209 indicates that the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction has formally met with you on three occasions in the last 24 months (p. 2). Can you please advise the committee whether you, your subsidiaries or your staff have met informally with Minister Taylor and on those occasions referenced the grant program in any way?

- I attended, along with approximately 500 other guests, the Liberal Party's annual Budget Dinner in the Great Hall of Parliament House on 11 May 2021. The grant program was not discussed.
- I attended a Menzies Research Centre function along with about 30 other guests on 5 November 2020. I had no knowledge of the grant program, and it was not discussed.

4. The Saturday Paper has reported: *An invitation was extended to federal Resources Minister Keith Pitt, on behalf of the chairman of Empire Energy, Paul Espie, for a site inspection at the company's proposed gas mine site in the Beetaloo Basin in the Northern Territory. The invitation added: "I understand that meetings in Darwin with Northern Territory government ministers are being arranged by Minister Taylor's office and also a CLP [Country Liberal Party] fundraiser dinner (21 August 2021, p. 1).*

Can you please confirm whether this invitation to Minister Pitt referenced a CLP fundraising dinner held at Darwin in October 2020?

- The reference quoted above is correct.

To your knowledge, how did the Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction come to attend the Beetaloo site visit?

- He accepted our invitation to do so.

Should you have any queries in relation to this correspondence, please do not hesitate to contact me on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,



Alex Underwood
Managing Director