

Australian Greens' additional comments

1.1 The Greens welcome the Committee's majority report, which we believe contains important reform recommendations for both the current and future Commonwealth governments.

1.2 Despite these recommendations there remains clear disagreement within the Committee about both the scale of the problem that coal and unconventional developments present, and the speed and degree of risk aversion with which the Commonwealth Government should act.

Concerns about coal and unconventional gas developments

1.3 The Greens commend the Commonwealth Government for its decision to expand the Bioregional Assessment Program to examine unconventional gas developments, given the importance of this program's work to date on cumulative impacts arising from coal mining and coal seam gas projects.

1.4 At present, the Victorian Government has a permanent ban on hydraulic fracturing, the Tasmanian and Western Australian Governments have moratoriums, the South Australian Government has proposed a ten year moratorium on hydraulic fracturing in its Limestone Coast area, and the New South Wales Government has some restrictions in place. Further, many governments around the world have imposed moratoriums on hydraulic fracturing. These constraints reflect the highly controversial nature of fracking, which involves huge amounts of water and carries the potential for environmental contamination and seismic activity.

1.5 Given Australia's limited water resources and the recognition in Australia and other countries of the potential dangers of hydraulic fracturing, the Greens recommend that the Commonwealth Government does not approve any new developments involving hydraulic fracturing and move towards phasing out existing hydraulic fracturing activity.

Recommendation 1

1.6 Australian Greens Senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government does not approve any new developments involving hydraulic fracturing and implements initiatives to phase out existing hydraulic fracturing activity.

1.7 Evidence presented to this inquiry outlined concerns about the reinjection of wastewater into aquifers, in particular the unknown impacts that this activity has on organisms living in groundwater and the possibility that aquifer reinjection causes increased seismic activity. The Committee commends the recommendation of the independent Scientific Inquiry into Hydraulic Fracturing in the Northern Territory that aquifer reinjection be prohibited until such time as scientific investigations determine that associated risks can be mitigated. The Greens recommend that the Commonwealth Government implement a moratorium at a national level.

Recommendation 2

1.8 Australian Greens Senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government implement a moratorium on the reinjection of water into aquifers in the absence of full scientific investigations determining that associated risks can be mitigated.

The impact of coal mining on water resources

1.9 The water trigger was first established because of concerns about the environmental impacts of coal seam gas and large coal mining developments. Despite incomplete baseline data used to inform many coal and coal seam gas project proposals, and concerns from experts about the comprehensiveness of data and modelling used to inform applications, such as the proposed Adani Carmichael coal mine in Central Queensland, coal and coal seam gas projects continue to be approved at the state and Federal levels.

1.10 This is despite the known environmental impacts of these projects, the untenably high emissions intensity of coal used for electricity generation and increased pressure placed on underground water and other resources that are vital to the ongoing existence of Australia's agricultural industry. Viable and cost-effective sources of energy generation exist and are already replacing outdated sources of electricity generated from coal.

1.11 The Greens are of the view that no new coal mining projects should be approved, and the Commonwealth Government should begin to phase out all existing coal mines.

Recommendation 3

1.12 Australian Greens Senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government ceases approvals for new coal mining projects and works to phase out all existing coal mines.

Non-compliance of existing projects

1.13 Clear statements were made by a number of witnesses about examples of non-compliance by project proponents and project operators. The Committee has noted in the majority report that instances of non-compliance with approval terms have taken place. The Greens support Committee Recommendation 4 for further departmental resourcing for compliance and monitoring activities, however we believe there should be further efforts to assess the compliance of existing projects.

Recommendation 4

1.14 Australian Greens Senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government initiate an independent review to examine the extent to which projects already approved under the water trigger have complied with conditions attached to their approvals.

Water resource modelling and bioregional assessments

1.15 Many witnesses also noted that the degree of uncertainty in existing water modelling was inexcusably high. The limitations of existing parameters around the impact of specific projects means that both the wider effects and cumulative effects of individual projects are poorly understood and regulated. Therefore, while the Greens also support Committee Recommendation 10, we believe that the risks and uncertainty inherent in water and environmental modelling are so large that projects should not be proceeded with until bioregional assessments for the relevant regions have been completed.

Recommendation 5

1.16 Australian Greens Senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government decline to consider proposals for extractive industry projects until after bioregional assessments of the relevant regions are completed.

'Associated water' use

1.17 The Greens are concerned about inconsistencies in the regulatory requirements for the extractive industry as compared to other industries in state and territory regulatory systems. In particular, evidence showed that the extractive industry in Queensland is permitted to take an unlimited amount of 'associated water' extracted in the course of regular operations, and that this water take occurs outside the state's water licensing requirements as applied to other users. The Greens consider that the current system permitting unlimited use of 'associated water' by the extractive industry should be ended.

Recommendation 6

1.18 Australian Greens Senators recommend that the Commonwealth Government work with the Queensland Government through the Meeting of Environment Ministers or another forum, as appropriate, to remove the current permissions that allow the extractive industry to take an unlimited amount of 'associated water' outside the state's ordinary water licensing requirements.

**Senator Janet Rice
Chair
Senator for Victoria**

