

SUBMISSION TO SCIENTIFIC PANEL ON FRACKING IN WA

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We are halfway through a survey of residents in the Capel locality, asking the question, do you want Capel to remain gasfield free? We began this survey, as we are very concerned about the possibility of conventional and unconventional gas extraction in the South west of WA. We acknowledge that there is a current ban on fracking in the Southwest due to the geology of the area. However, it is possible that new technology may bypass this issue in the future, and that this ban will be overturned. We would like to give our support behind the ban of fracking in the whole state of WA, for the following reasons....

AGRICULTURE:

Over 5000 gas wells in Qld as at December 2016 have caused disruption to farming practices, loss of livestock due to air and water contamination and an inevitable drop in the value of properties. A 2016 CSIRO report indicates ¹ economic losses for the farming community. Gas flaring is allowed to take place all year round, putting properties at risk of bush fire.

WATER:

Our most precious resource is being squandered in the process of extracting “tight” or “shale” gas which requires large volumes of water together with toxic chemicals designed to release the gas. The waste produced from this activity is likely to be dispersed into surrounding land or water systems.

As well as numerous reports of water contamination in the USA, including tap water catching fire, we are seeing more references to pollution of water supplies close to gas mines in Australia ². Gas leaks into aquifers have been shown to render water undrinkable³. Apart from risks associated with drilling into the aquifer which produces our limited supply of water, there are many incidences of inappropriate disposal of waste from the mining process. It might only take one accident to contaminate an aquifer. We believe that ANY risk to our water supply is too much risk.

TOURISM. A multitude of wells developed over small areas has a negative visual effect on the attractiveness of surrounding countryside (eg. The famous south west corner of Western Australia which attracts thousands of tourists every year). Residents of the Margaret River region urge a ban of fracking in the Whicher Range. ⁴

SOCIAL EFFECTS: Some rural communities in south west Qld sustained stress resulting from the incursion of the mining and gas industries.⁵ This has shown to have an impact on community mental health and wellbeing.

MENTAL HEALTH

Significant stress levels from both on-farm and off-farm pressures are apparent in areas surrounded by gas mining activities⁶ (eg. The suicide of George Bender, Qld cotton farmer in 2015). The pressure of trying to maintain farming standards is overshadowed by the wielding of power by the mining companies who have a legal right to enter and mine any tract of land that promises a yield of gas. There is little government control of activities of mining companies once they have been granted a permit to explore. No legislation protects the rights of land owners and no regulations enforce adequate compensation for people whose livelihood or health have been adversely impacted.

The forgotten impact on mental health, is the majority of people in the state who are deeply concerned about the risks associated with onshore gas mining. The sheer threat of gas mining and living in a gas permit area, has caused much stress and anxiety from the many people I have interviewed. The evidence of this disapproval is seen in the groundswell of Gasfield free surveys conducted right throughout this state, asking for their localities to remain gasfield free.

RISKS TO LAND AND PEOPLE: Forget “best practice” due diligence” “appropriate regulation” etc. This terminology has been shown to be meaningless – eg three decades of fracking and other forms of unconventional gas mining in the USA have devastated thousands of acres of farmland and caused a serious increase in health problems of large numbers of residents. More recent examples over the past 10 years of activities in southern Queensland and Northern NSW indicate that industrial practices involved in fracking and unconventional gas mining are still causing damage to land and water and harm to people. A recent scientific article⁷ indicates that, over a large area of southern Qld, there has been an alarming rise in hospital admissions due to respiratory and circulatory problems.

ARE THE FINANCIAL RETURNS WORTH THE RISKS?

Gas well leaks – who can guarantee these will not continue? More than 15 years since the encroachment of gas mining activities into numerous parts of Australia we are still receiving news about leakage of gas wells. It is not a matter of “if” but “when”. Can we afford to take this risk? Will the government or the mining companies take responsibility for the pollution of our land and water that we depend upon for our very survival? Will they be prepared to pay compensation to the people who live there, if an unthinkable gas accident happens?

Articles and bulletins published over the past 5 years reiterate the proven risks associated with gas mining eg a 2015 bulletin⁸ from “Unconventional Gas Mining”.

DO WE NEED THE GAS?

Countries around the world are increasing their investment in renewable energy, as it is in the long term, more economically viable. Sweden leads the way with 53.9% of its energy needs coming from renewable sources. Gas may burn more cleanly than coal, but it has been shown to be equally detrimental to the climate, given the higher production cost and impact of methane including through fugitive emissions^{9,10}. Compared to carbon dioxide, over 20 years, methane is 86 times more potent in its effect on global warming. We have

more than enough gas off shore North West WA and in the Bass Strait to see us through until renewables take over. A growing number of governments have decided that fracking and unconventional gas is not worth the risk. New York State and Maryland, Scotland, Germany and France have enacted bans and moratoriums. In Australia, Victoria has banned unconventional gas and moratoriums exist in both Tasmania and the NT.

Our survey is already half completed and we have a high majority of residents so far that want Capel locality to remain gasfield free. From talking to so many people, it seems the general consensus is that our government needs to listen to common sense. Gas extraction onshore should not happen for all of the above reasons. However, gas extraction through water catchment, populated and farming areas, puts our very existence at risk, and is unforgivable.

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