

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Decommissioning Oil and Gas Infrastructure

Leongatha – Wednesday 11 February 2026

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESS

Chris Waites, Chief Executive Officer, Gippsland Ports.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the hearings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Decommissioning Oil and Gas Infrastructure, coming to you today from Leongatha Memorial Hall. We are joined now by a representative from Gippsland Ports. Welcome, Chris.

All the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. The information you provide during these hearings is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during these hearings, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review before it is published on the committee's website.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am the Member for Southern Metropolitan Region, Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee and one of the members of the committee here today. I will let members introduce themselves. I will be starting with someone you are familiar with.

Chris WAITES: Hi, Melina.

Melina BATH: Hello. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Hello, I am Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, the Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Online we have –

David ETTERS HANK: David Ettershank, Western Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Tom McIntosh will be back with us shortly. It is a pretty straightforward set-up today. We will invite you to make an opening statement, and we will ask you some questions and take it from there. The floor is yours.

Chris WAITES: Very good.

The CHAIR: If you could just state your full name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of before you start, for the Hansard record, that would be great.

Chris WAITES: Chris Waites, Chief Executive Officer, Gippsland Ports. Thank you. From a Gippsland Ports perspective, obviously we are very much interested in the decommissioning of the offshore oil and gas. Clearly our remit as a state government entity is limited to state waters. As to what happens with the actual works out at the platforms, although of general interest to us, we do not have any authority or deeper interest in what happens out there.

Our two key issues are safety within our port and pollution control within our port – both things that we are responsible for managing. From the outset I can say that we have had significant dealings already with Allseas, and our harbourmaster has a fairly high degree of confidence given Allseas' experience in this sort of activity. The discussions so far have been very professional and are giving us confidence that Allseas will certainly undertake their role in a very professional manner, so that is giving us a lot of confidence. Control of invasive species and more general pollution control within Corner Inlet will be a significant point of interest for us. We will do what we can to ensure the relevant guidelines are met, but that is not specifically under our total control.

Port safety is probably the largest issue for us. These are large vessels for Corner Inlet, particularly for Barry Beach, which is a fairly constrained – a small port. I should not say constrained, but it is a small port. The vessels that we are talking about are right on the upper limits of what we have permitted into Barry Beach and that terminal before. We are confident they can be managed, but we will require very close controls, and access

in and out will be severely weather dependent. Corner Inlet is a fairly harsh site under certain weather conditions, but overall we would like to think that the decommissioning activities will be positive for Corner Inlet, for Qube as the facility manager and for Gippsland Ports as the port manager. We have a small team down at Port Welshpool, and we would hope that they will be involved throughout the decommissioning process.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. We will take it from there. I might just clarify a few things for the record. Allseas is the name of the shipping contractor who is engaged by Esso to do the on-water activity?

Chris WAITES: Correct, yes.

The CHAIR: We have been taken through that today. We had a briefing earlier with Esso, so that is useful. How much engagement and consultation have you had with the project proponents and over what timeframe as the need for decommissioning arose? How long have you been involved in the process of planning for the decommissioning?

Chris WAITES: With Esso?

The CHAIR: Yes, with Esso.

Chris WAITES: At least two years or in excess of that. We have been well aware of the looming deadlines, and 2027 has always been the key year. Esso has been very open and in constant discussion, particularly with our harbourmaster.

The CHAIR: How would you describe that interaction? One of the things the committee needs to do is to get an assessment about how both the planning for the decommissioning is going but also any understanding, particularly of how those elements in Victoria's jurisdiction have been progressing. In your assessment, how has the engagement between Esso and Gippsland Ports been in the period you have been engaged with them on the decommissioning process?

Chris WAITES: Esso are obviously a very, very large organisation, and they have been respectful in their dealings with Gippsland Ports. I think they understand also that at the end of the day the harbourmaster has some fairly significant powers with managing traffic in and out of our ports. I think Esso have been respectful but also understand that they need to comply with the relevant controls that we have as the port manager.

The CHAIR: Obviously Qube manages the facility on a day-to-day basis now for supply of the facilities at the moment. Are there any significant concerns that you have had with the operation of the facilities in the last few years?

Chris WAITES: No. We deal with Qube on a weekly, often daily, basis over various issues, and have always found them to be completely professional and aboveboard with any dealings we have had with them. We have no concern about how Qube operates the facility.

The CHAIR: Would you have confidence that there are mechanisms in place that should issues arise during the decommissioning process, there are lines of communication and resolution procedures available to quickly and efficiently deal with any issues that emerge?

Chris WAITES: I am confident that the legislation and the controls are in place. Is there the confidence that they can be enforced when necessary? That will really come down to resourcing.

The CHAIR: Resourcing of Gippsland Ports?

Chris WAITES: Not resourcing of Gippsland Ports. I think resourcing of state government entities that have that remit to enforce various elements of the legislation.

The CHAIR: Sure. Things that you mentioned as being of particular concern are the two concerns of safety but also pollution controls. Maybe if you could expand to the committee a little bit on some of the pollution-related risks that you see from this project, and then we can get into a conversation about how they are being mitigated.

Chris WAITES: Yes. Allseas will be foreign-flagged ships. They will be coming from all over the world. That runs the risk of invasive marine pests being introduced into Corner Inlet. There are understood controls in place for how they manage their vessels. As long as they are complied with, that should not be an issue. I mean, we have vessels in and out of Corner Inlet all the time and foreign-flagged vessels that have come in and out over numerous years, so that has been managed in the past. There is no reason it should not be managed throughout this decommissioning process. But that is a significant risk; it is throughout the world.

The CHAIR: That is with the vessels. Are there any risks that you foresee with any of the materials being transported on the vessels and/or onto the on-land facility?

Chris WAITES: These topsides on oil rig jackets are coming in from waters not far off our coast. There is the potential, I would imagine – I am no expert in invasive marine species, but there is always the risk – so it just needs close management. I think that is a key element. These jackets will be brought on land, but through port waters, through the Ramsar area. So that is a key element from Gippsland Ports' perspective, to have that well managed.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Chris, for coming along. Chris, I am interested – today, when we were out at Barry Beach, we saw a survey vessel out just in Corner Inlet surveying the depth, I am assuming, and the discussion was around dredging. Could you explain how dredging occurs in, say, the Corner Inlet, Barry Beach area – how often and what the rules and regulations are around that? Could you paint a picture for the committee on dredging?

Chris WAITES: Yes. Barry Beach has not required regular – I should not say regular; it requires intermittent dredging, but it is maintenance dredging, it is not major capital dredging. I would assume that Qube, apart from this decommissioning program, have an operating port that they will be looking at for dredging – I would think maintenance dredging – and for other activities that they undertake at their site. There is no dredging that we have undertaken in the last couple of years of any significance. As I said, I would expect if there was dredging, it would be maintenance dredging. There was talk, with the offshore wind, of potentially major dredging, but that was taken off the table once Port of Hastings was designated as a construction port.

Melina BATH: It is still in play, isn't it? It is still in play.

Chris WAITES: Potentially.

Melina BATH: So Qube is responsible for the dredging. Ports oversees the safety and implementation of that. Could you define that?

Chris WAITES: Yes. Ports could potentially undertake the dredging for Qube, as any other contractor could. We have dredging vessels that could undertake maintenance dredging for Qube should they go down that path. That is something that Gippsland Ports can potentially offer statewide anyway.

Melina BATH: Sure. And what is the timeframe? Say this vessel identifies today that dredging needs to occur in order for the decommissioning – the large, heavy lift vessels et cetera. What is the timeframe between engaging – do you see any concerns around a timeframe to engage and conduct that dredging prior to the decommissioning?

Chris WAITES: It really comes down to the scale of the dredging that would be required. If it is maintenance dredging, there are a number of contractors, including us, that could undertake that in a fairly short timeframe. I would suspect the planning elements and the approvals phase would potentially be in excess of the actual dredging campaign.

Melina BATH: Great. Thanks, Chris. A last question on the dredging: when people hear dredging, there is often a sense of, 'Oh my goodness, what's going to happen to the natural environment, the seabed et cetera?' Naturally, dredging means making the seabed reduce. Can you just talk us through what rules, regulations or legalities are in there to make sure that dredging is done efficiently but also environmentally safely?

Chris WAITES: Maybe as an example: Gippsland Ports undertakes dredging at Lakes Entrance.

Melina BATH: Yes, regularly.

Chris WAITES: We get a 10-year permit for that, which requires federal and state approvals. That process has taken six to 12 months generally to get through all the planning and investigation. It is a very well controlled and well regulated process. Corner Inlet would be no different. I do not think that a 12-month timeframe would be required, because we would not be looking at a 10-year permit. It is a one-off maintenance dredging campaign.

Melina BATH: A short circuit, yes.

Chris WAITES: It is a very well controlled process. The dredging areas and disposal grounds are very, very well controlled.

Melina BATH: Are they out to sea? It depends where it is.

Chris WAITES: They can be. They can be on land if there is an appropriate site for renourishment, but often they are out at sea.

Melina BATH: They cannot travel all the way around to Inverloch, can they? No. Next question.

Chris WAITES: Lakes Entrance is offshore – within close proximity to shore but still offshore. So there is no reason that would not be similar in Corner Inlet if an appropriate disposal site was found.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I am probably going to run out of time, but in terms of safety, clearly everyone wants this to be a safe operation for the human beings on the boats et cetera. There will be an increase in terms of vessel transfers and vessel traffic in general. Does Ports play a role in this?

Chris WAITES: Yes, we do. I alluded before to the controls, particularly about the tide and weather down at Corner Inlet, because it is a fairly harsh site at times. Our harbourmaster will have very strict controls on when vessels can transit – at what tides and under what wind conditions, because they are the elements that will create significant risk factors should they not be well managed. We are totally confident, as we have been in the past, that they can be controlled and managed. Weather cannot be controlled, but we can manage vessel movements within certain constraints.

Melina BATH: I am going to borrow one quick question.

The CHAIR: That is okay.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. This is just a hypothetical. Companies run on money, and this is a big exercise. It is a very expensive exercise. Do you feel that you will receive any pressure at all if the weather is not serviceable to let the vessels go, or do you feel very confident that you have the authority to say, ‘Sorry, you’re not moving today. It’s too dangerous’?

Chris WAITES: We have total confidence. We have the authority, and we will put the controls in place because we have done so in the past. No, we will not be pressured. The risks are too significant. And I do not think Allseas is that unprofessional that that would –

Melina BATH: No, I was not in any way – I just meant you feel very confident that you can control the system so that it is safely moved or not moved in terms of what the weather is.

Chris WAITES: I do. We have I think one of the most competent harbourmasters in the state. I am very confident in his judgement.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you for appearing today. You mentioned before that aside from safety another key interest is the environmental challenges associated with some of this work – invasive species and potential toxins. Can you expand on what that looks like and what concerns you might have?

Chris WAITES: I should clarify: more pollution from oils and those sort of things from vessels rather than the invasive marine species. It is a concern, but it is not something that we have the expertise to manage. The vessel pollution – any oil spills and the like – is more our remit.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. You said that is something you have been talking with Esso about. With this current decommissioning project, are there any concerns or is there anything that you can share with us with respect to environmental risks?

Chris WAITES: No, we do not have any specific concerns. Obviously we just have that general oversight. We are aware that invasive marine species have been an issue throughout ports in Australia. It is something that we will keep a close eye on, and the relevant authorities will closely monitor it, I have no doubt.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Does Gippsland Ports have any role in developing plans to manage some of those risks, or is that not within your remit?

Chris WAITES: I would really need to take that question on notice because I need to clarify the extent of our remit.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. There are obviously a lot of steps in the process and a lot of different regulations and requirements that companies like Esso will have to comply with in some of this work. How much of that is shared publicly, including any concerns or challenges or anything that you might be raising with them? Is that information that is publicly available?

Chris WAITES: It is not something that is generally shared. It is a negotiation between the port manager and whether it be Qube as the facility manager or Esso as the proponent of this project. It is not something that is published on any of our websites or shared more broadly. It is discussions between us and the proponent.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Do you have any role in overseeing things like logistics to support some of this work, or do you have any role in oversight of that – for example, making sure there is enough appropriate infrastructure, accommodation, all of that sort of thing for workers?

Chris WAITES: No, that is not one of our areas of particular responsibility. We control what are called local knowledge certificates. We ensure that the vessel masters coming in and out are familiar with the port and have done certain transits in and out. That is again from a safety perspective. They are the controls that we have, and a particular interest area we have is that we have masters coming in and out who are familiar with the port and can operate safely.

Sarah MANSFIELD: In terms of the safety aspect, if there are safety incidents, is that something that is publicly reported on?

Chris WAITES: No. As the port manager we negotiate directly with the facility manager or the proponent of these projects. As I said before, that is generally the role of our harbourmaster.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Are there any safety concerns around some of the work that is taking place with the decommissioning projects that are unresolved?

Chris WAITES: No. I think we have got to remember also that this is an activity that has happened in and out generally of Corner Inlet for many, many years, right back from the commissioning of those offshore facilities. Barry Beach has had a long history of this sort of vessel activity, although this may be slightly different, being a decommissioning process. It is really a variation on the same that has happened for many, many years.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. I think that is my time.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Dr Mansfield. Mr McIntosh.

Tom McINTOSH: Hi. Thanks for being here. If there was an incident or a ship ran aground, what would be the chains of command, reporting lines or lines of responsibility? How would that play out if there was an incident?

Chris WAITES: Once we are aware of it, the shipping, whether it be Allseas or Esso, would be required to notify AMSA immediately. We would do so anyway as the port manager as soon as we became aware of it, and then AMSA would take over.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. As far as that chain of responsibility goes at that point, where would it sit then?

Chris WAITES: It sits initially with our harbourmaster and then with the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, and Safe Transport Victoria would also have a role, I have no doubt.

Tom McINTOSH: As far as the legislative and regulatory compliance goes during this transport, we heard this morning about where that sits. But as for you being responsible for it, you have got clear understanding of that legislation and regulation and what sits where, I suppose, with the various areas of the movement of decommissioning?

Chris WAITES: We have a clear understanding of our role of managing vessel transits in and out of Corner Inlet. What happens beyond that should there be an incident – and I am not aware of any having occurred for the last seven years that I have been within the role – is there will be authorities beyond Gippsland Ports that will take the lead. As I say, AMSA will take a significant lead in any vessel grounding or major event of that nature.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. And as far as visibility of any associated staff, whether that is on a ship or on the wharf, that would be reported as part of the reporting? You see you have got visibility of who is –

Chris WAITES: Correct. As the port manager we have visibility of any of those activities within our port.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. Gippsland Ports will be responsible for ensuring legislative and regulatory compliance during the transport of decommissioned materials into Corner Inlet and Barry Beach Marine Terminal. Chris, are there any legislative or regulatory changes that you would like to see recommended in this report to ensure a better and safer decommissioning?

Chris WAITES: I believe the legislation exists to properly manage these activities. As I say, should there be enforcement requirements – I mean, that will be where the rubber hits the ground. Are they effective? Are they well resourced enough to be able to manage an incident should it occur?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. That is all I had to ask you. You had your opportunity to let us know, so thanks.

The CHAIR: All good. Just checking online – Mr Ettershank, do you have any questions?

David ETTERS HANK: Just one or two, Chair. Chris, thanks for joining us. In response to a question from the Chair with regard to risk management, you raised the issue of resourcing specifically of state government entities. Could you elaborate for us on what you meant by that comment?

Chris WAITES: We are a small port – we are not one of the major ports like the Port of Melbourne – so I suspect that the state has the resources available to manage anything that should happen should things go untoward down at Corner Inlet. That is all I am alluding to – that we are remote from the Port of Melbourne and the major ports, the Port of Geelong and the like, and sometimes it is more difficult to resource more remote areas.

David ETTERS HANK: Thank you for that. Does any of the decommissioning link to proposed port developments in Flinders, do you know?

Chris WAITES: It is not something I could comment on particularly, no.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay, no worries. In terms of Allseas using extensive foreign-flagged vessels and crews, you talked about the possible threat of invasive species. Are there other issues related to foreign-flagged vessels and foreign-flagged crews that you are aware of that the committee should understand?

Chris WAITES: The issue of having appropriately trained masters for the particular port. I mentioned the local knowledge certificate that is required for these masters so that they understand the intricacies of getting in and out of a port like Corner Inlet. They will probably not be familiar with the port, hence why we require them to undertake the local knowledge training, which is physically being on a vessel at night and in the day, transiting in and out of Corner Inlet.

David ETTERS HANK: So is there a pilot service that is located for those entries and exits to Corner Inlet?

Chris WAITES: There is an approved pilotage service for Corner Inlet, and pilotage will be required for these transits.

David ETTERS HANK: Right. So when would that start to occur?

Chris WAITES: There is a pilotage service. I think they have got a couple of berths available at Port Welshpool already. I think they have been proactive in trying to get sites early on. They could come from anywhere. I imagine there will be a Melbourne-based pilotage service; someone will be contracted in to provide the service.

David ETTERS HANK: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just on the resourcing, Mr Ettershank raised the resourcing and relocation questions. Are you aware of examples in the past where due to incidents there has been between the various port authorities a necessary reallocation of resources to have surge capacity in case of an emergency or critical incident?

Chris WAITES: Should there be an incident, if it is a maritime security issue or whatever, there are protocols in place to get resourcing from across the state.

The CHAIR: Right. If something happens, even though it is a small port down here, the expectation and the protocols are that those resources would be redeployed from other ports to support –

Chris WAITES: Escalation allows for resources to be brought in from other areas, yes.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. I appreciate that. With that, unless anyone has got any other questions, that concludes the evidence we have received from you. We really appreciate the time you have taken and the expertise you brought to the hearing. You will receive a copy of the draft transcript in about a week to review. With that, the committee will take a short break.

Chris WAITES: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.