

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into unconventional gas in Victoria

Sale — 30 June 2015

Members

Mr David Davis — Chair

Ms Samantha Dunn

Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

Mr Shaun Leane

Ms Melina Bath

Ms Gayle Tierney

Mr Richard Dalla-Riva

Mr Daniel Young

Participating Members

Mr Jeff Bourman

Mr James Purcell

Ms Colleen Hartland

Mr Simon Ramsay

Staff

Secretary: Mr Keir Delaney

Research officer: Ms Annemarie Burt

Witness

Ms Margaret Williamson.

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

Ms WILLIAMSON — My name is Margaret Williamson. My address is [REDACTED]. I represent the Coal Seam Gas Free Kongwak community, which is 605 people who signed that they were against coal seam gas in our area. That is 605 people out of 610 people we surveyed in our town and our surrounding areas. We are dairy farmers, meat farmers, wine growers, poultry farmers or cattle agistors. There are representatives from nearly all of that.

Our concerns are, and I will go through these really quickly: the impact on surface water and groundwater; methane into the atmosphere; impact on agriculture and horticulture; food security; tourism; the volume of heavy trucks on our inadequate roads; the value of our land; but, most importantly, our children's future. Many of our neighbours are fourth generation farmers. They deserve to be able to pass their farms on to their children. We are informed, and informed well, by reporting from Queensland, the northern rivers of New South Wales, the US, the UK and from independent scientists and economists, and we would rather the state's resources be put into alternative sustainable forms of energy. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, well done.

Witness withdrew.

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Mr Rodger Davis.

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

Mr R. DAVIS — I am Rodger Davis, [REDACTED]. I am a farmer. The first part that I would like to raise is when coal seam gas first started I rang the MLA — Meat and Livestock Australia. The answer I got was, ‘Don’t know’. Then I sent emails. I never got a reply. So I came to two conclusions: one, they did not know; two, they were muzzled by the government. The second part is what came up last Wednesday: pollution in the ground, Fiskville. Properties adjoining the CFA training complex are now quarantined, their animals are poisoned, what do we do with them?

Gas, as far as I was led to believe, is not for Victoria; it is for overseas. How long will it last? And when it is depleted, what will be left? Contaminated land, water and all our foods. Then what will we do? We will have to import from China. I will give an example: Patties Foods. In terms of the waterways, I have a river at the bottom of our place, and we have platypuses in it. It is going to be great when they all die, fish die, crayfish die.

My suggestion to the coal seam gas people is, first off, start exploring Treasury Gardens, the Shrine of Remembrance, the Botanic Gardens, the MCG and Toorak, and see how the people of Melbourne will carry on like we are carrying on. We do not want it, and I am bloody sure they will not want it.

As it was mentioned, asbestos. We used it for years and years and years; now it is totally banned. Thalidomide — they did not know anything about that, and look what happened to that. With the member, I forget her name, who asked the question to the shire councillors what affiliation did they have with businesses?

Ms HARTLAND — Colleen.

Mr DAVIS — I am going to ask the opposite: do the government members have any affiliation with coal seam gas? You would not want to ask Peter Reith, because he would say yes. Was that a fair question?

The CHAIR — They are all fair questions.

Ms SHING — It is rhetorical I think at this stage in your contribution.

Mr DAVIS — Finally, on *Four Corners* last night we saw we have politicians good and bad. By hell they raised it last night! Finally, my terminology for coal seam gas is short-term gain, long-term pain.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Sir.

Witness withdrew.

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Mr Ronald Wangman.

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

Mr WANGMAN — My name is Ron Wangman. I am from [REDACTED]. I want to bring to your attention the impact to me as a beef farmer. The last drought ran for 13 years. The impact of that drought in our local area was that our local reservoir ran down to 4 per cent. Therefore the local water authority — the South Gippsland water authority — had to obtain licences from Southern Rural Water to draw water from groundwater bores. In our area we sit on a groundwater system called the Woorayl Basin.

The CHAIR — You might want to spell that for us later.

Mr WANGMAN — Later.

The CHAIR — That is all right. I just want to make sure that Hansard gets it.

Mr WANGMAN — If this industry comes to our area, the water is a big elephant in the room. We are going to have a draw down on water and possible contamination. No-one can prove either way what it is going to be. The Leongatha Murray Goulburn Factory, and they were noted as a big user of water, so they have had to look at their water systems and become more efficient. If they are drawing from that bore and the community is drawing from that bore, we are in trouble the next time we have a drought if that water system is affected. That is a local impact in my area.

The second thing is that we have seismic activity in the area. In our area we have the Strzelecki fault, and we have numerous tremors. Now something that has not been mentioned is about foreign migration of gas. There is a certain amount of gas that will be drawn to the wellhead, but if we have particular fault lines in that area, there is a possibility of foreign migration of gas.

If we go to a day where it is 40 degrees, then we have the potential for bushfires. We have already had a royal commission into faulty infrastructure in relation to a powerline company. On Black Saturday we lost a lot of lives, so this is another area that we need to consider. I do not think the CFA have a position on that. It was mentioned early this morning by one of the speakers that in relation to a fire pit they had problems. But foreign migration of gas would be another area to also look closely at. Thank you for your time.

Ms SHING — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.

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Ms Elizabeth Balderstone.

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

Ms BALDERSTONE — Thank you for the opportunity today. I am Elizabeth Balderstone from [REDACTED]. I have had a long involvement with Landcare, the VFF — I am actually on a VFF mining and gas task force with Alex. I have also been on ERMAC, which is currently I think still an official body but we have not met for some time under the new government.

I am very aware that I am speaking as an individual today. I have discussed with Alex Arbuthnot earlier that we have to be so careful with our hats, and I do get concerned — and I think a lot of people share this — that someone of Alex's great reputation, who has done lots of terrific things, has become a bit of a spokesperson for the farming community in Gippsland, but there are a lot of farmers big and small who have an opposing view and have huge concerns about this industry.

In terms of my own family, I am on a farm that has been in the family for over 100 years. I have been there 40 years. My own family background is both primary industry and the mining industry in a big way, but I see so many people even involved with the mining industry who have great concerns about this industry. We live in an area which has a strong agricultural background, but also in our landscape on the coastal plains down near Woodside there are a huge number of lifestylers, hobby farms and thriving seaside towns as well. They are all equally affected by this industry; it is not just the farmers.

Agriculture is here for the long term. It has been here for the long term, and it will continue to be so. I was in Chinchilla recently. I drove through that area, saw the huge impact. I flew over that area, but we were told by the motel owner in Chinchilla that already numbers are dropping after four years. They have passed the expansion and the building phase, and already the numbers are declining. A lot of the people came in from other areas; FIFO obviously is a big factor. It is not just going to be local jobs, and they are short term.

I get upset when we are told we are, and people talk of us as being, affected by vocal groups. That is basically saying that Friends of the Earth are getting in the ear of farmers. That is not true. We are all educated, learning, listening, reading. We are exposed to a lot of information, and to be fair onshore gas had a pretty bad reputation before it came to Gippsland.

There is a lack of trust in the industry. I happened to be on the fire truck that day at Seaspray when Lakes Oil was flaring off at Seaspray. We are a very depleted community of very few people, and to go out to those sort of burns is not appreciated. A number of us, especially some farmers around Yarram, worked for years trying to prove the connectivity between dropping groundwater levels in the Latrobe aquifer around the Yarram area, used by a lot of the dairy farmers there. For years Esso BHP said there was no connectivity with the offshore gas extraction, offshore oil extraction, but finally it was acknowledged. We stood in a room in Sale and CSIRO and Esso admitted that there was connectivity. So how can we as a local, regional community have faith or confidence in some of these things? No wonder we are wary.

Simon mentioned coexistence with mineral sands — such a different industry to an onshore gas industry, which spreads across enormous areas.

The CHAIR — Yes, I get that.

Ms BALDERSTONE — Sorry, I am just finishing up. As a farmer, like so many farmers and landholders, I believe we are the custodians of the land and in anything we do, we need to hasten slowly. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Witness withdrew.

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Ms Lorraine Halabarec.

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

Ms HALABAREC — Thank you for listening to me. I am Lorraine Halabarec. I live in Mirboo North, and I have a business in Leongatha. My home address is [REDACTED], and my business address is [REDACTED]. My daughter and I have a florist shop, which depends on water for the growing of flowers.

Richard, you said today that you do not know much about the gas fields and the industry. Country people know a lot about the encroachment on people's land of big developers in Melbourne and everything like that. Country people are trying to let town people know that our land is being encroached on by these multinationals as well.

The CHAIR — To be absolutely fair, we are here to listen.

Ms HALABAREC — Sorry. That is one comment. The other thing that concerns me is that today there has not been any talk about who is going to pay for the infrastructure, for all the roads, should the mining go ahead. As many people have said today, South Gippsland is a very rural area, and our business and many other businesses in Leongatha rely on the farmers. While the drought was on some of the businesses had hard times, and a lot of the businesses are having a hard time now. When the desal went ahead many small businesses lost employees. A lot of those businesses will not take those employees back because they are scared that the people will head off again to the mining companies because of the big money.

The other thing is that nothing has been said about our roads. What about our kids? What about the young kids who travel on buses around Gippsland? The roads are pretty poor around the area. We do a lot of deliveries out to farms and around and at the moment we are very hesitant to let some of our employees travel on the roads because we consider them to be a health hazard. We are not prepared to let them travel on them.

What about our kids? Nothing has been said today about the future of our kids and what we are going to leave them. I am a mother and a grandmother. One of my girls said, 'What is the use of having kids?', because they do not see a future at the moment. For them to say that you have to wonder, 'Is our government really looking after our kids into the future?'. That is about all I have to say.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.

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Mr Andrew Harrison.

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

Mr HARRISON — My name is Andrew Harrison. I am from [REDACTED]. I am a hydrogeologist with 22 years of experience, 16 of which have been here in Gippsland. Until a couple of weeks ago I worked for a large environmental engineering consultancy firm, and in that capacity I was involved in part of the Victorian water science studies, looking at the impacts of coal seam gas.

My point today is that unconventional gas is a very technical area, and the impacts are very difficult to determine. I have seen the rest of my community trying to grapple with these technical issues without too much information. The consultation that has been undertaken so far has, in my view, all been one way — that is, the community back to government. There has been very little information coming from government back to the community on some of the science studies that have been undertaken in terms of the impacts of coal seam gas. It is very difficult for the community to try to grapple with these issues without that proper scientific information. In my view it would be much better for all that scientific information to be tabled so we can all debate it from an informed position.

I have two questions for the committee. I did ask these questions of the secretariat before this meeting, but I did not get an answer; they could not provide me with an answer. My understanding is that the Victorian water science studies have now been completed. My question is: will those Victorian water science studies be available by the due date for submissions from the community? I think that is 9 July. The second question is: will those Victorian water science studies be available to you as a committee to help you to grapple with some of these issues by your reporting date of early December?

The CHAIR — I can answer that only in part. We have had an initial briefing out of the department. That was quite a lengthy and detailed briefing, but it was incomplete, and we are proposing that there be further briefings from the department. You can rest assured that we will ask exactly those questions, and we will seek that information. Whether it will be available by 9 July, I am not sure. I think I am able to speak on behalf on the committee when I say that if people have further material to put in front of the committee as information becomes available, we are certainly receptive to that information.

Mr HARRISON — Is it the plan for those Victorian water science studies to become public eventually?

The CHAIR — There is a long list of items and this is not the area we were briefed on the other day by the department, but there is an understanding that the department will continue the briefing process of the committee and some of those hydrological matters, I understand, will be part of that.

Mr HARRISON — Okay, because it is a very technical area. Just to give you one example — I would really love to talk to you about the science but I cannot — there is a massive difference between the scale and types of impact of tight gas versus coal seam gas. I think both tight gas and coal seam gas have been amalgamated into this one big melting pot, and I think that — —

The CHAIR — You can certainly make a submission, although he may have some other issues; I am respecting that aspect. But Richard, I think, did try to make a little bit of that point at several points during the day: for people to unpack those different types, and response and details — I do not think I am speaking out of turn for the committee on this. It is not the same; there are differences.

Ms SHING — I might also add, and this may provide some assistance, that the Victorian Auditor-General is in the process of conducting an inquiry in relation to the operational effects of coal seam gas/unconventional if it were to go ahead, so not trying to pre-empt the outcome. That has involved a great deal of very specialised work that goes right back to the primary source material. That will be made available to the committee. I understand the Auditor-General is providing that report in August. That report will then, presuming it gets tabled in Parliament, be made publicly available as well. That goes right to the heart of those very technical issues that you just raised.

Mr HARRISON — Okay. Thanks.

Witness withdrew.

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Ms Marg Thomas.

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

Ms THOMAS — I will be really brief. I am Marg Thomas, and I live at [REDACTED]. I am a representative of Coal and CSG Free Mirboo North. We have had lots of eloquent speakers here, and I think the big thing I would like to impress on the committee is that in Mirboo North we have a very upset community. Not only do we have coal seam gas licences but we also have recently found out that a mining company has been granted a coal exploration licence over our area, so we have an upset community.

Ms SHING — Renewals, you mean — the renewed licences?

Ms THOMAS — It is an exploration licence that has been granted.

Ms SHING — Renewed, yes.

Ms THOMAS — To Mantle Mining. So we are dealing with two issues, plus we are having the seismic surveys. The difficulty we have found is comforting, I suppose, the residents of the area, so much so that we set up a community information centre so that people can come and talk to us about the problems they are having. But it is really difficult, and I would just like the committee to know how difficult it is. We really need to look after these people. That is all. Thank you.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — In terms of the community information centre that you have set up, are you able to provide the committee with what you are providing to the community and just outline briefly why you have created this?

Ms THOMAS — Okay. With all of these things happening simultaneously — as I said, the people were really upset — we give them information as in hand out leaflets. We provide information on how to make submissions to this committee, also how to send objection letters, things of that nature. We provide a lot of information for them which is not normally available to them.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Could you provide that to Keir, please? I would like to see it.

Ms THOMAS — Sure. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.

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Mrs Maureen Versteden.

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

Ms THOMAS — I am Maureen Verstedden of [REDACTED]. I want to talk as a nanna, a great-grandmother, mainly about the health effects on the children. To me, if we understand it properly, with fracking for tight gas we are getting the tiny specks of compressed gas from within hard rock that was put there billions of years ago when Earth was formed. That was during the time of fire and brimstone gases. There was nothing on Earth. It was a long time before humans, a long before the dinosaurs. They came and they died out because their environment went wrong.

What we are doing is letting everything out into our environment in strange numbers. In America there are over 1 million wells. There are 1.5 million to 2 million wells. You are letting that out of every well 2 million times. It is arsenic, lead, mercury, glycol ethers, BTEX chemicals and radioactivity. The numbers win it, but we are absolutely not familiar with them.

As you know, we are thoroughly tuned into our environment, like the plants. We have some that grow by the seaside and some in the desert. Some like water, some do not. Chameleons change their colours. We are tuned into our environment. If the chemicals change in our bodies, we might have too much iodine or not enough, too much salt, too much sugar. If we have two lots of chemicals, the chemist finds out what tablets we are taking before we take others. We are finely tuned into our environment but we are changing our environment so quickly that our bodies are not be able to change. Our children cannot catch up.

In America already there are 20 per cent more birth defects. There are health reports everywhere if you would like to look for them. In one area in America there are 10 times as many cases of breast cancer. There is a list of the harms. There are 16 000 people in the list of the harms if you like to google it. It is a great long list. It is not hearsay; that is a group of people who have been in the news. There are all the deaths. There are 16 000 people in the Pennsylvania list, but there are millions of others in America.

It is all covered up. You have to look for it, but you have to know where to look for it. You have to go to the universities and the National Toxics Network and google their site. Believe the toxics network and have a look at our health reports. Our environment is messed up and then that affects our health. Go to the health. Never mind about the little things. Go further on. We have the proof now. We have got it from America, we have got it from Tara and Chinchilla in Queensland. We have the proof. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.

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Mr Glen Maher.

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

Mr MAHER — My name is Glen Maher. In the year 2000 I was elected to the Sale GSPA, which is the ground supply water for the Boisdale aqueduct out this way. I live 4 kilometres from the Gippsland Lakes and I am surrounded by farmers who are dependent on the underground water — the Boisdale aqueduct. The township of Sale is also on the Boisdale aqueduct and they have a 3500-megalitre water right. I do not think they will be impressed if something goes wrong with the aquifer.

The question raised about how deep the bores are — whether they are 100 feet or 5000 feet — is not the issue. The issue with the aquifer is inter-aquifer interference — that is, waters going from many other layers of aquifers through to this one, that one, or other impurities from further down rising up the outside or inside of a bore casing of a well affecting and polluting the other aquifers. This is what you see when you have gas coming up through the water in all those Chinchilla-type things and American things. The effects on the water quality will have a dramatic effect on a lot of rural product.

One of the neighbours behind me has quite a large dairy which they have set up out there. John Vardy was actually a director of Murray Goulburn, and he is a Lock the Gater for fear of what might happen to the aquifer. There is a tomato grower opposite him, there are vegetable growers up and down the road — they are all reliant on that good-quality water that comes from that aquifer. All the other amazing stuff is relevant, but the science is not clear. That is what we really need — more science, more clarity and more understanding of the potential for the destruction of a very valuable and good aquifer.

Witness withdrew.

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Witness

Ms Kerrin Schelfhout.

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

Ms SCHELFHOUT — I am Kerrin Schelfhout of [REDACTED]. I am a representative from the Seaspray community. We have a community group down there, Gasfield Free Seaspray. We have been living this nightmare — not to put too light a word on it, a nightmare — for the past three years since we have become aware of what was actually happening in our community. Lakes Oil has quite a few wells in our area. They have been fracked 10 years ago. This all happened before there was a lot of community awareness as to what was happening. We have been living under the threat of the advancement and the possibility that there might be hundreds of wells in our area. To say that Lakes Oil are bad neighbours is an understatement. They keep us uninformed, they keep us under threat of what they are actually doing. They do not communicate with us. We ring them and we get conflicting stories all the time. The Wombat 1 well is within 100 metres of our town water supply. That has flooded since that well was originally fracked, and we do not know what has happened to any of the toxic water that came out of those wells. We cannot get a straight answer on that. We were told there was none. We have video evidence on one of their promotional videos of them actually with their hands in the produce water.

I really want the committee to be aware of the human impact of this. We have lived and breathed this for the past three years. We have informed ourselves, we have educated ourselves. If anyone could say to us there is no risk to our community, our health, our water and our future generations, we would heave a big sigh of relief and take a holiday, because we are exhausted from fighting this. Thank you.

Ms HARTLAND — Kerrin, you are referring to the Wombat sites?

Ms SCHELFHOUT — Yes, to the Wombat — —

Ms HARTLAND — How far is that from the primary school?

Ms SCHELFHOUT — A kilometre — yes. Easily seen from the primary school, just off the banks of Merriman Creek where the town draws its water. That is part of the massive proposed Wombat field.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.

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Ms Rosemary Maher.

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

Ms MAHER — I am Rosemary Maher. I am a farmer from Meerlieu. My address is [REDACTED]. I wanted to raise the issue of energy use. There have been a number of points raised today where there has been an implication that coal seam gas — unconventional gas — will be a viable option for an energy source into the future and it will be a benefit.

I am a farmer. I am not represented by Alex. I come from a farming community where 98 per cent of the residents have said that they do not want coal seam gas. Then more broadly than that, on our farm we have invested substantial capital and infrastructure so that we are not dependent on external sources of energy. A new dairy farm has been built 5 kilometres from us. They have built that dairy so that they are not dependent on external energy. There are heaps and heaps of other agricultural practices that have already invested substantial capital so that they are not dependent on our current gas.

There was a very interesting article in the *Age* about the gas market and the fact that there is really no formal gas market operating. It is still flexible, movable, it is managed by entrepreneurs and it has seemed that who has the biggest pull pushes the market. At the moment with overseas prices, having any extra gas coming into the market, regardless of what form it is, is not going to benefit our communities or Australians at the door when they buy their gas. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.

The CHAIR — I thank the people who have been here through the whole day. It has been a very enlightening day for all the members of the committee. There is obviously further to go tomorrow and much more around the state. Thank you also to the staff. We will reconvene tomorrow.

Ms HARTLAND — And especially Hansard.

The CHAIR — And Hansard too.

Committee adjourned.