

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into unconventional gas in Victoria

Sale — 30 June 2015

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

The CHAIR — Welcome, Ross. Could you give us your name and address?

Mr SCOTT — My name is Ross Preston Scott, of [REDACTED]. In case you do not know where that is, that is paradise, on the Gippsland Lakes.

Ms SHING — That is a very big call, Mr Scott.

Mr SCOTT — You can put that in my address too.

The CHAIR — Ross, if you could make a short statement on what is in your written submission and anything else you want to add, and then we will ask you questions.

Mr SCOTT — I have kept my statement brief because I realised that if I got more extensive I would be covering a lot of the subject matter that the other speakers would be covering and that my background and the environmental issues that I care about probably were not going to be covered by them. By profession I am a mechanical civil municipal engineer. I have worked on Australian aid and British aid in Fiji. I have worked in Papua New Guinea for the Shell group of companies and in Cambodia for the Asian Development Bank on emergency rehabilitation. When I work overseas I tend to be a highway engineer; when I come home I get all environmental.

I have been a river management consultant for the Latrobe and Thomson rivers improvement trusts, a consultant for the Mid Gippsland Rivers Management Board, general manager of the Lake Wellington Rivers Authority and project engineer on the Snowy rehabilitation trial project. My family has had a house on the lakes for 55 years. I have been visiting the holiday house during all that period, and I have lived there for the last 15 years. I was a foundation member of the Save the Gippsland Lakes Committee, chaired by the mayor of Sale in about 1985. He set that committee up, and I was a foundation member. I have been active, when I am in Australia, on lakes and river issues.

There are a few things I would like to point out to the committee, including maybe something that you will not hear or do not know already. I have said in the submission that there is much denial regarding the current degraded condition of the Gippsland Lakes. That has been a battle for the Gippsland Environment Group for years and years, to the extent that I was invited by Ramsar to meet the secretary-general in Sydney last November. I did as most engineers would do: I gave it to him straight. To quote Graham Harris, when he presented the audit of the ecological function of the Gippsland Lakes report in 1998, 'If you don't do something soon, the lakes will be stuffed'. I said to the secretary-general, 'He was right; they are'.

The federal government has taken us on as a third party — and you will read that in my brief statement — and has negotiated with the state government. The federal government has pulled the state government of Victoria in to start addressing the current degraded condition of the Gippsland Lakes.

I will give a brief explanation as to why the lakes are degraded. There is everything you have been hearing today that could impact on the watershed in the way of pollution, which is the main issue, which I will mention later. There has been an ongoing impact on the Gippsland Lakes, which are virtually nothing but a cesspool for the industries of West Gippsland. These are unmonitored, untested wastes, which we are pushing for, but since 1998 there has been a massive impact, with increased salinity, and this has come from the ocean. There have been many excuses given or explanations as to why the salinity has come up, but they tend to shy away from the fact that the entrance has been doubled in depth and the tidal speed has more than doubled since the trial dredging of 1998.

The trial dredging of 1998 — which was really capital works in drag — did not come about by accident. The East Gippsland Shire, in 2003, received \$193 600 from the federal government to explore and investigate Lakes Entrance as a deep-sea port. The reason they gave for this is that they wanted to increase the navigability of the entrance to cater for the deeper draft vessels servicing the offshore oil and gas rigs. That was the driver and has been the driver. That application quoted the entrance as 2.5 metres deep, and the shire's aim was for 6 metres. Two years later, in 2005, the state government allocated \$31.5 million to increase the infrastructure around Lakes Entrance for the port. Meanwhile the entrance was still 2.5 metres deep. You may get the indication that it was a lay-down misère — what was going to happen — the entrance was going to be deepened.

The permit was issued to deepen it from 2.5 metres, and it was always a maximum of 3, because the old *April Hamer* dredger could only get to 3 metres. They got a permit to go to 4.5 metres for that one-year trial. They continued to dredge in 2009–10 without a permit under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. When the Environment Defenders Office, acting on our behalf, reported that to — they keep changing their name — SEWPAC, or Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, we received a reply saying it was not a substantive breach of the EPBC act. I am saving that one up for the next time I get a speeding fine — ‘Officer, it was not a substantive breach’.

Gippsland Ports rapidly went to make the whole dredging exercise formal — official — and applied for a dredging permit in 2011, and they received that, only this time the permit was to go a metre deeper, to 5.5 metres, and the tidal speed went from, I think, 3 to 14.3 knots. The terminology for the amount of salt water coming in per tide is called a tidal prism. The tidal prism massively increased with the new dredging operation. That has been denied, and that is almost unbelievable. With the entry salinity in the lakes, what we call the baseline salinity increased — in other words, the normal salinity level increased. With a drought, the salinity went up; with a flood, it went down — but the baseline salinity was lifted beyond that which was achieved in the original breakthrough dredging to the entrance in 1889.

What we saw as an impact was death, basically, all around the lakes. The seagrass died. We were invaded by a *synechococcus* marine algal bloom for the first time ever. The bivalves — the shellfish — died. The sandworm died. The swans had nothing to eat; they went onto farmland nearby. The department issued permits to go and shoot swans, which did not go down very well. We were invaded by five species of sharks — so you can go swimming in our lakes any time! We also got squid and stingrays, and we got invaded about a year later by the green European shore crab, which has wiped out the food chain of fisheries and destroyed fisheries around the world. We have them in the lakes right now.

What I am trying to say is that the lakes were in a diabolical condition, and what we are concerned about is that we are likely to get another impact from basically the same industry that was responsible for this change. What was the driver in all this? As a blunt old engineer, I have to say I think it was revenue harvesting by the state government. Also, what we are looking at now is income harvesting by commercial interests. That is basically where we are at right now.

The thing that is a real concern is that water is a limited resource in this country, and it is sure a limited resource here now. It was deemed some time ago that we were wet — we could become the food hub of Victoria. I think it will be explained to you tomorrow that the irrigation district is probably overcommitted and that that is compounding as our weather patterns are changing, our rainfall is diminishing and our run-off from the lakes catchment is also declining. That also compounds the increased salinity — the less fresh water we have going in, the more saline it gets.

The other thing that is happening in the lakes is all to do with the fresh water and the salt water balance. One of the most important industries in East Gippsland is tourism. I said in my paper that it sounds corny, but the economy of East Gippsland is basically based on tourism — it is a very important factor anyhow, as well as farming — and the tourism industry is based on fishing, and principally the black bream. The black bream cannot spawn in the lakes anymore because the water is too saline. Basically, in simple terms, their eggs float, and they are smart enough that they do not do it; they run to the rivers to get the right salinity level. With the salt water underneath and the fresh water on top, their eggs then float out into the seagrass beds and they are protected there. The trouble is the seagrass beds are not there anymore. So fish stocks in the Gippsland Lakes are crashing. Anything I say today I can back up with documentation later on demand.

We have in fact a crisis not only environmentally but economically. The tourist industry has this habit — it is a bit like John Cleese saying, ‘Don’t talk about the war!’. We have the saying here, or I hear it all the time, ‘For God’s sake don’t talk about any problems with the lakes, like sharks and the fish going down the drain, because it’ll impact on tourism’. The fact is that it is impacting on tourism already. Fishermen who used to stop here are now buying their bait in Lakes Entrance and going further up the coast, so we are not seeing the tourist trade. Maybe it has not hit home properly yet, but it is starting to impact.

We touched on during your previous talks enforcement of regulations and the implementation of that procedure. It has been my experience that anybody in a government department who takes on an issue that is going to impact on private industry will be at risk of losing his job or losing promotion — and you are looking at one. In 1997 I reported a nationally accredited laboratory for falsifying the nutrient results from the Macalister

irrigation district. I was warned three times, could not live with the fact that I had been gagged, blew it and got sacked. Two days later Minister Sherryl Garbutt reappointed me, but basically that was the end of my career. I am trying to give an example that any person who goes to really implement the regulations that are in place that can impact on the ministry, those people are at risk. This is the worry you have.

An example is the EPA. The EPA have got marvellous regulations — underfunded, under-resourced and under threat. An example would be in 2013 the EPA put out a report on the Gippsland Lakes and they reported that the deeper entrance had increased salinity in the Gippsland Lakes. I reported that to our member, Tim Bull. The very next day the EPA were under attack from the ports manager and the DELWP manager, and also the new Gippsland Lakes Ministerial Advisory Committee prepared a public relations statement to sort of cover up the comments that I was making to the media. The report was changed, and it then read that the entrance had been deepened to maintain the traditional navigability. So that poor scientist in the EPA got muscled, and that is just an example — and it needs investigation, by the way, but that is another fight. That is the sort of thing you are dealing with. So when we come to coal seam gas you can have all the regulations under the sun to protect the environment, protect farmers and protect their way of life, but if we do not have a management system which has a pragmatic manager at the top that has steelcap boots on, it is not going to work. There is something wrong with the system.

There is something wrong with our philosophy too. I was in Fiji on the top of a hill one day. I had ridden a horse up there — and I hate horses — but I was working for the Poms opening up villages by road. I had to negotiate the road reserve as we sent it up the mountains with the road. The chief said to me, ‘Mr Scott, we don’t own the land. We are the caretakers of the land. The land belongs to my sons and my sons’ sons’. I believe we have gone missing with what our role is. We are assuming that everything that is under the ground is there to exploit for our generation. I would suggest that what is there is an asset for future generations and we do not have to necessarily go and dig the whole ruddy lot up at once. We are going to look like a Nauru in 100 or 200 years time — a big hole in the ground growing vegetables for Asia, probably.

When we are talking about risk assessment or analysis, invariably it looks at future risk and does not take into account the degraded condition that we have already got to start with. When we look at the risks of our future mining activities, it can compound the problems we have already got now. I have a professor mate who says to me, ‘The politics is ahead of the science’. I have heard similar expressions here today, but I think that is basically right. Our greed driver is ahead of our knowledge and the science. I hesitate to use the expression — and I do not like it — of precautionary principle, but my terminology is ‘Hurry slowly. Know where the hell you’re going before you move’. Nobody is saying that one day what is there will not be able to be mined and harvested without having a detrimental impact, but I am more than aware of what has happened around Morwell, where the land has sunk 2.4 metres in some places and 1.2 metres in other places because we have a thing called differential settlement. The aquifers under the ground are not evenly spaced, so we get this. We have destroyed farmland. We have turned farmlands into swamps around the Morwell area, and we stand the chance of having settlement — which I do not think anyone has talked about today — as a result of some of the mining activities that are proposed.

I think I had better let you have a go at me.

The CHAIR — I will restrict myself to one straightforward question here. I note in your submission you draw attention to the fact that:

... the current exploration licences both overlay the Ramsar-listed Gippsland Lakes site and also run to the headwaters of the lakes catchment at Warragul.

I understand that there would need to be environmental approvals if the Ramsar wetlands were in any way to be impacted. You might want to comment.

Mr SCOTT — You are correct, Chair. It would have to go through the federal government, it would be the EPCB act and it would have to be Ramsar. I assume you will know what Ramsar is; I hope you do. I did not want to get into that.

The CHAIR — It is a migratory bird treaty.

Mr SCOTT — But basically it is an international agreement to protect the migratory birds that come from Japan or wherever down to the Gippsland Lakes and spin off to New Zealand and whatever. A treaty was signed in Iran.

The CHAIR — In 1970 or thereabouts.

Mr SCOTT — And the Gippsland Lakes became part of that parcel in 1982. So, yes, it is sitting straight over from Lakes Entrance through to Sale, where we are now, and in particular it is sitting right over Ramsar-listed wetlands. I do not know whether that has been adequately taken into consideration, but it should be because it will be like trying to do a river construction job in a heritage river. You have got to get your right permits.

Ms SHING — Thank you very much for your comments in relation to your submission. It seems to me that a lot of what you have put to the committee today refers not only to the knock-on future consequences of specific action taken on one site into the future but also by way of analogy to the importance of making sure that we take decisions that enable us to, in your words, ‘hurry slowly’. I would like to ask you about risk — and this is something I have asked a number of other witnesses today — and your views on the extent to which risk in the terms of reference around unconventional gas might be able to be managed now in such a way as to properly manage potential problems and allow an industry of this proposed nature to go ahead. Do you think that there is a tipping point at which risk can be managed to take account of the various considerations that are in the terms of reference themselves?

Mr SCOTT — I am not an expert in anything, by the way. If the science gets ahead of the politics or even catches up to the politics, then there is no reason why anything cannot be done anywhere. But at this stage of the game it would seem that the science is way behind, and the thing that worries me personally is contamination of the watershed, contamination of the aquifer and contamination of the surface waters. I personally have this almost as a mission where I have been pushing for adequate monitoring of the feeder streams in the Gippsland Lakes and adequate scope of testing, because right now they are simplistic. They are the Waterwatch range of tests that are being done, and they would do not pick up the range of heavy metals. We tested on mercury a little while ago, and I will touch on it again. There is a range of heavy metals: there are pesticides, insecticides, fungicides, hormones, antibiotics. Someone mentioned the spud farmers. They use 23 different types of sprays, so that you end up with a perfect spud that has not got a blemish on it and then they go and wash them in bleach before you get them. Now all that, somewhere or other, ends up in the creek — I think it is Narracan Creek — and comes down in the lakes.

We have a flood in the Morwell River that goes in and busts through the elevated diversion and floods the line. It gets pumped out into the lakes. Or we have an emergency discharge, so we just pollute the lakes again. When we are on top of the science, when we can manage properly and when we are good managers, I do not think there is anything we cannot do — but we are not within a bull’s roar of it, in my opinion. We are managing this land for the next generations, and I think we have to keep remembering that.

Ms BATH — Thanks, Ross. I can hear your passion for the lakes and the ecology around the lakes and your concern for the salinity. That is one area. I asked the girls just before: with respect to conventional gas, have you looked into any research around the effect of salinity through drilling or through gas exploration? What would be the effect on the water around having done research in that area?

Mr SCOTT — To answer that as best I can, my limited reading — and it is limited, because the lakes are what I am on about — is that it can come up with saline water out of some of these sites. But compared right now with what is coming through the entrance and what is being pumped out of the mines, the open-cut mines, it may not be the salinity — in fact, it may not be major — but it depends on where it is and how much it is.

Ms BATH — Did you mean open cut mines or coal seam — —

Mr SCOTT — The open cut coalmines are pumping salt water out into the lakes. They are 100 metres deep, and they dewater another 100 metres below; otherwise the bottom blows up. It is called pore pressure blowout. So they have dewatered. The mines around Loy Yang or whatever have dewatered up as far as Rosedale, so you get settlement as well, and the trees die because their roots cannot get down there. It is all good stuff!

Compared to what is going on now the salinity issue is probably not the main driver. It is the products they use for fracking combined with the simazine and the atrazine for the plantation forestry combined with the mercury and dioxin that comes from APM — or has come from APM. We add this witches brew together, and it all ends up as a mix in the Gippsland Lakes. And they can combine to form products we are not even aware of — so I am advised. So pollution is a major problem, and we tend to be eating the end product. Tomorrow you are going to have Dr Jo McCubbin, who is a paediatrician. She is one of three people who raised the issue; well, she supported me, because I have been trying for four and a half years and getting nowhere. The three eminent doctors approached the health department, and they are now doing a survey of the fish of the Gippsland Lakes to see the mercury levels to see if they are fit for human consumption, and if some of them are, then to put out recommendations on the meal sizes. Pregnant women just should not be eating fish with mercury in it at all, so that is the sort of stuff that is going on with the Gippsland Lakes.

I just worry we are going to get more contaminants. Here we are for the first time with the federal government and the state government and Ramsar pushing for something to be done on the lakes, and we could be impacted on again.

Mr LEANE — I will make a comment. I spent all week at Paynesville — —

Mr SCOTT — I hope you did not eat fish!

Mr LEANE — I did. I actually caught a lot of bream.

The CHAIR — It's tasty.

Mr SCOTT — At least you are not pregnant. That is the main thing.

Mr LEANE — No. I know you are concerned about tourism, but it was a great week.

Mr SCOTT — And the water is beautifully clear, isn't it? Because it is salty, and all the dirt particles coagulate and sink to the bottom. That is a sign of salinity.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks, Ross. I am a pretty keen duck shooter, you could say, so I am fairly well versed with Ramsar-listed and protected wetlands, especially in northern Victoria, where I come from. And they are quite important to me and my activities and recreations. Do you think this kind of exploration could go on, given all the correct protocols and safety precautions are in place to exclude certain areas from it, such as the Ramsar-listed wetlands?

Mr SCOTT — Firstly, let me say that if it was not for field and game, we would not have half the wetlands we have got in Victoria.

Mr YOUNG — I agree with that.

Mr SCOTT — Secondly, one of the wetlands that is at risk to salinity is the Heart Morass, which is on the lower end of the La Trobe River, where field and game put \$1.5 million into buying back the low-lying farmland between the Sale common, on the South Gippsland Highway, and the Heart reserve on Lake Wellington; right? The Williamson foundation put in \$1 million; we are just about to lose it to salt. Another driver. I drew up the plan that came up with the concept of buying the land back in 2000. I got rubbished at the time, and thank God Peter Symond, the mayor, picked it up and ran with it.

I would be trying to protect wetlands, to keep wetlands right out of this, and I do not think that the industry would be silly enough to be putting sites down in known wetlands, but I think the effect is going to be more peripheral. If you drop the watertable, you are not going to have any water in the ruddy wetland, are you? I think there will be indirect impacts. I do not think I answered that very well, but I do support you knocking a few feathers out if you can keep building wetlands.

Ms HARTLAND — Thanks very much for your presentation, Ross. It was really interesting. I think the point you are getting to is that we have a problem with the cumulative effect, so already the lakes are in trouble.

Mr SCOTT — Yes.

Ms HARTLAND — And if this happens you are really concerned that this would add to it. Can you talk about anywhere that you are aware of in the world where there has been a similar problem so we could compare?

Mr SCOTT — I think we are unique. I have looked at Holland and other places to try to come up with structures that can hold the salt back. The best I came up with was the Mary River just out of Darwin. So, no. I do not like the term ‘cutting edge’, but I think we are tackling something that no-one else has tackled. This is the largest inland waterway — navigable waterway — in the Southern Hemisphere. We do not have too many of those places around the world. I am digressing a little bit, but I forgot to mention that the state government has just authorised a consultant to look at a salinity barrier at Metung, which is something I personally have been suggesting for 6 years and others have been suggesting for 50. That is a constructive move. There is a big awareness that if we do not do something rapidly, we are going to impact right up the chain through commercial tourism and have an environmental disaster. Darren Chester, our federal member, has publicly said that the Gippsland Lakes are our equivalent of the Great Barrier Reef. I just hope that we treat our lakes a bit better than they treat the Great Barrier Reef.

Ms SHING — I reckon they are better.

The CHAIR — I reckon they are better too.

Mr BOURMAN — Thank you for your submission. At the going rate now it appears that the Gippsland Lakes are, fish stock wise, starting to deteriorate. If this were to go ahead and there was a problem, how long do you think the fish stocks would last before it becomes absolutely barren? I know it is a ‘How long is a bit of string?’ sort of thing.

Mr SCOTT — If we can leave the coal seam gas exercise out of it, the fish stocks in the lakes have had it anyhow, because the professional fishermen are netting the spawning bream as they go up the river mouth to spawn. Thank God for Lisa Neville, and I think it is also the agriculture minister; they have said they are going to get the nets further out from the mouths of the rivers to try to save this. The way for us to really save it is to change the salinity in the lakes, and we can if we can get this damn barrier in place — a submerged barrier. I have been a construction engineer, and I could build the thing — let us put it that way. We have just got to go through the process of the consultants, and we have to do all our hydrological studies and whatever, but what is going on now, what you are suggesting, it will probably have a minimal effect. It might have an effect on the quality of the bream, but it will not have an effect on the spawning and the recruitment. That is what we are missing right now. Do not forget the five species of sharks we have got. Some of them are nasty, so swim in the pool.

Mr BOURMAN — Exactly.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Ross, just a broader question. You have been specific about Gippsland Lakes. Do you have a view about the onshore gas industry being located elsewhere and thereby just declaring where you are suggesting as being off limits?

Mr SCOTT — I love rivers. Mankind has got an affinity for water, haven’t we? Historically man did not go and build a city on the top of a hill with no water. I worry about rivers and waterways from the contamination point of view. The first thing you lose is your invertebrate chain, your food chain. You lose your fish, you lose your native crays, you lose your platypus, because there is no food. In a general sense that would be my concern. That is not very specific, but then maybe your question was not specific.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — In light of that, have you done any other investigations or work outside of the immediate area in respect of that?

Mr SCOTT — No.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — No?

Mr SCOTT — You are dealing with a 78-year-old retired civil engineer. I am busy fighting on the lakes, let alone — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Okay, but in terms of the lakes, you would have significant evidence that you have presented either to government or to others that you would be able to present to the committee here about some of those effects of the impact.

Mr SCOTT — The problem we have — politicians are great ones at this — is there is no evidence to suggest, and many a sentence starts that way, because we do not monitor and we do not test it. If you do not monitor, you do not test, you do not know and you do not have to change your practice. Once we get this — and I am hoping that the worm is turning, squirming right now — we are going to get continuous monitoring equipment on our streamflow gauging sites so that we can test concentrations of these products. We multiply it by the amount of water going by, and we are going to end up with loads. When we start doing that, we can start to get into a position where we can manage our environment and manage our streams and manage industries that may be polluting. Until we do that, I could not comment any further.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Do you have any evidence to present to the committee? You have given us verbal — —

Mr SCOTT — On?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Is there any sort of documentary evidence that you have produced to assist the committee in its deliberations — —

Mr SCOTT — The only thing I have had input into since I retired was with the professor, and we looked at the endocrine disruptors coming from intense dairy farming in the Macalister irrigation district. The range of products that are actually coming through that no-one is testing for — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Could you present that?

Mr SCOTT — Sure. I can send a copy of that, yes. I do not know that it is going to help you much, but it is an indication that we are not doing it.

Ms SHING — Primary source material is important.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It is important for the committee.

Mr SCOTT — We got a grant from the Myer Foundation. That testing is very expensive because no-one is doing it. If you have a one-off test, the unit rate is up through the roof, but if you have 100, the unit rate comes down.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Anything that you have done in the last 78 years that is relevant — and I say it tongue in cheek — but anything you may be able to present to us — —

Mr SCOTT — I was bloody dangerous in preschool, I can tell you.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Any bad finger-painting. No, anything that would assist the committee that we could then look at in camera.

Mr SCOTT — I can give you some information — I do not know whether that is going to help either — but the nutrient loads coming off the Macalister irrigation district are about three times what was being reported. What I am saying is that we have to up our game. If we are going to look after the environment, if we are going to look after the wider community, if we are going to look after commerce and tourism and whatever, we have to manage a damn sight better than we are doing now.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I need the evidence that you have given us.

Mr SCOTT — I will give you whatever I can.

The CHAIR — I appreciate that.

Mr SCOTT — And feel free to come back if you think there is something else.

The CHAIR — The secretariat may. That is appreciated.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you for the opportunity. I just want to pose a question in relation to your expertise in all things water, not so much the Gippsland Lakes, which I understand you have been very active in. I want to get back to the regional development economic argument, because I think we all agree and all take a position that the environment is to be protected at all costs. Of course we have talked all about agriculture and the food bowl and the importance of that in this region, and there is no dispute about that. But we also know that gas is critical to the growth of regional Victoria. We also know that there is a limited supply of offshore gas and that onshore gas which can be scientifically proved to be environmentally friendly will come at a cheaper cost than offshore gas, and that is in conflict with the evidence we have heard from Friends of the Earth. But I am sure that the mining industry will provide further data on that tomorrow.

The question I want to ask is: given the regional development issue, as distinct from this scientific environmental issue — it is about the contamination of water, which is of great importance to most. They say to me that they are drilling down 1500 to perhaps 2500 metres, so they are actually coring below the watertables of the more sensitive areas here in Gippsland and in Western Victoria Region. Do you believe under any circumstance, when they are drilling that deep, that in fact contamination could possibly occur, given that they are actually going well underneath the watertables, bringing the gas up. We are not talking about fracturing or where it requires high-pressure water with a standard chemical in the bore, but just from your scientific knowledge, can you make a statement in relation to both the depth of the drilling as against the watertables, where they are sort of sitting well up? You would know better than I do what the watertables are around here, but I would suggest the depth of drilling is significantly lower than what the watertables are.

Mr SCOTT — If I were a politician being interviewed by the media, I would say that is a hypothetical question. I do not really know, and if the industry does not know what the effect of that is, I sure do not know.

Mr RAMSAY — We have not posed that question to them yet.

Mr SCOTT — I am not likely to, because I have come in to support the coal seam gas people who are concerned about their rural properties. As a kid I was on a farm, and I have been dealing and working with farmers in river management and on rural councils for all that part of my life. I have got the greatest respect for them, and I do worry about the impact on rural properties. Again, if we have got the science right — provided we have and it is not some sort of spin — I think anything is possible, but I feel that we are in a hurry to just keep up the standard of living of this generation at the cost of future generations and the cost of our environment.

The CHAIR — I thank you very much, Ross, it has been most enlightening. As I say, the secretariat may come back to you in the forthcoming period for some further information, so thank you.

Mr SCOTT — I invite you all to come back to me.

Witness withdrew.